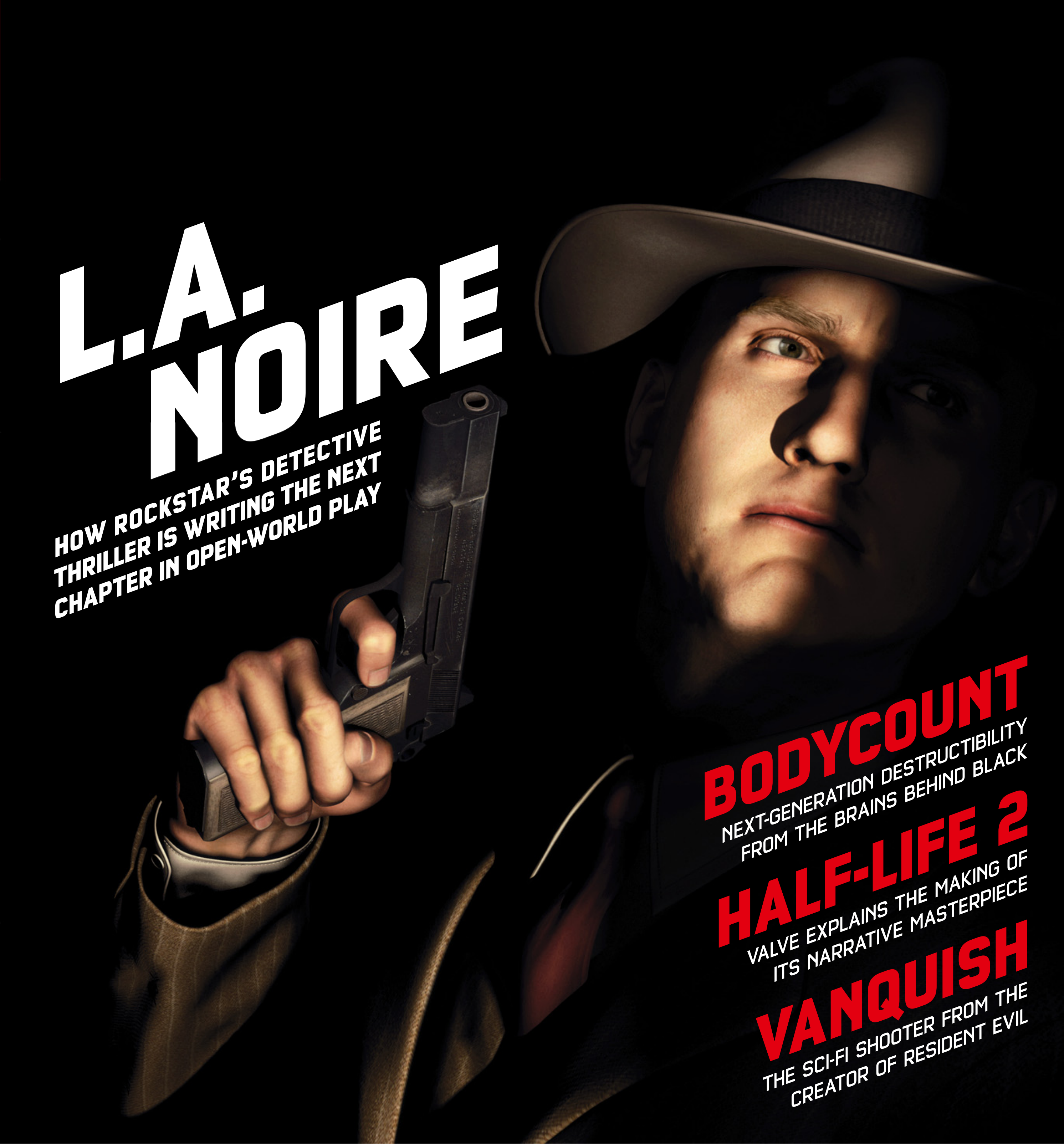

L.A. NOIRE
HOW ROCKSTAR'S DETECTIVE THRILLER IS WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER IN OPEN-WORLD PLAY
BODYCOUNT
NEXT-GENERATION DESTRUCTIBILITY FROM THE BRAINS BEHIND BLACK
HALF-LIFE 2
VALVE EXPLAINS THE MAKING OF ITS NARRATIVE MASTERPIECE
VANQUISH
THE SCI-FI SHOOTER FROM THE CREATOR OF RESIDENT EVIL





Issue 211's cover featured one. Issue 212's cover carried another, only this time actually being put to fearsome-looking use. And now the cover of issue 213 has one, too – the third prominent gun in a row. It may not be quite as flamboyant as the hardware that's gone before, but still we'll receive letters from readers complaining that we're too entrenched in the apparently dirty business of promoting games in which characters shoot stuff. We'd like to apologise to those of a sensitive nature… but, well, we can't.

The world's first commercial videogame, *Computer Space*, was all about combat, and the appeal of lining up an enemy in your sights in order to destroy it hasn't dulled in the intervening years. Are too many games centred on shooting released each year? Probably. Are the worst examples some of the most miserable games imaginable? Sure. Does that mean we should be avoiding guns? As the games on this issue's cover illustrate, the answer's no.

Not when Codemasters' Guildford studio is producing *Bodycount* (p56), a progressively minded firstperson shooter built on lessons learned from the production of *Black* and driven by some of the most passionate talents we've encountered in UK game development. Not when we're looking to pay respect to *Half-Life 2* (p68), one of our games of the last decade (see **E**210). And not when we're returning from Tokyo having met with Shinji Mikami for a demonstration of *Vanquish* (p50), a game that couldn't be more about the destruction of hardware if it made your PS3 or Xbox 360 explode upon contact with its disc.

But now, of course, the incongruity. Because cover star *LA Noire*, despite the pistol, isn't driven by the type of action you might expect from the publisher of the *Grand Theft Auto* series. As our story details on p42, it makes use of breakthrough technology in order to present a never-before-seen level of character detail, bolstered by appropriately accomplished scripting, voice-acting and storylines, and driven, at heart, by investigative work. It's a game about exploring interactions with digital lifeforms, not simply rubbing them out. And if they refuse to interact appropriately? Well, sometimes you're left with no option other than to break out the shooter…



EDGE

Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275
Email: edge@futurenet.com
Edge website: www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
Tony Mott editor-in-chief
Alex Wiltshire online editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Richard Stanton features editor
Craig Owens writer
David Valjalo writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Owain Bennallack, Stacey Black, Matthew Castle, N'Gai Croal, Alex Dale, Chris Dahlen, Martin Davies, Nathan Ditum, Tim Hardwick, Duncan Harris, Leon Hurley, Jon Jordan, Kelly MacDonald, Michael Monypenny, Simon Parkin, Steven Poole, Graham Smith, Randy Smith, Rob Smith, Rory Smith, Citizen Smith, Terry Stokes

ADVERTISING
Jas Rai advertising manager (jas.rai@futurenet.com)
Guy Jackson sales executive
Poorvi Smith advertising director
Advertising phone 0207 042 4219

Ian Miller group art director
Robin Abbott creative director
Matthew Williams design director
Jim Douglas editorial director

ADVERTISING
Jas Rai advertising manager
Guy Jackson sales executive
Poorvi Smith advertising director
Advertising phone 0207 042 4219

MARKETING
Tom Acton marketing campaign manager
James Kick brand marketing manager
Esther Gardiner promotions executive

CIRCULATION
Stuart Agnew trade marketing manager
Matt Cooper trade marketing executive
Rachael Cock trade marketing director
John Lawton international account manager (john.lawton@futurenet.com)

PRINT & PRODUCTION
Frances Twentyman production co-ordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Richard Mason head of production
Colin Polis Future Plus buyer

LICENSING
Tim Hudson head of international licensing

FUTURE PUBLISHING LIMITED
James Binns publishing director
Simon Wear chief operating officer
Robert Price chief executive

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Phone our UK hotline on 0844 848 2852
Subscribe online at www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons.
Covers printed by Midway Colour Print, Holt, Wilts.
Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT.
(0207 429 4000)

"The night was dry, yet it was raining."



A member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations
29,007
January–December 2009

Future produces carefully targeted magazines, websites and events for people with a passion. Our portfolio includes more than 180 magazines, websites and events and we export or license our publications to 90 countries around the world.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).

Chief Executive: Stevie Spring
Non-executive Chairman: Roger Parry
Group Finance Director: John Bowman
Tel +44 (0)20 7042 4000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442244 (Bath)

www.futureplc.com





CONTENTS

APRIL

This month

Every month

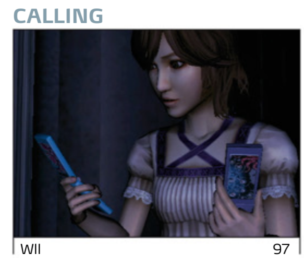


CONTENTS

Hype

Review









GOD OF WAR 3



PS3 88

BATTLEFIELD BAD COMPANY 2



360, PC, PS3 90

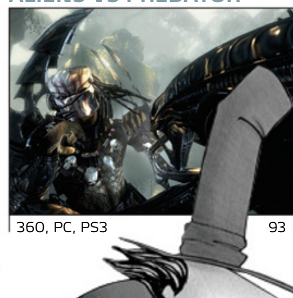


NO MORE HEROES 2



WII 92

ALIENS VS PREDATOR



360, PC, PS3 93

YAKUZA 3



PS3 94

JUST CAUSE 2



360, PC, PS3 96



PB WINTERBOTTOM



360 97

INFINITE SPACE



DS 98

ALICE IN WONDERLAND



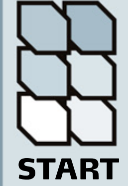
DS 98

WHITE KNIGHT CHRONICLES



PS3 99



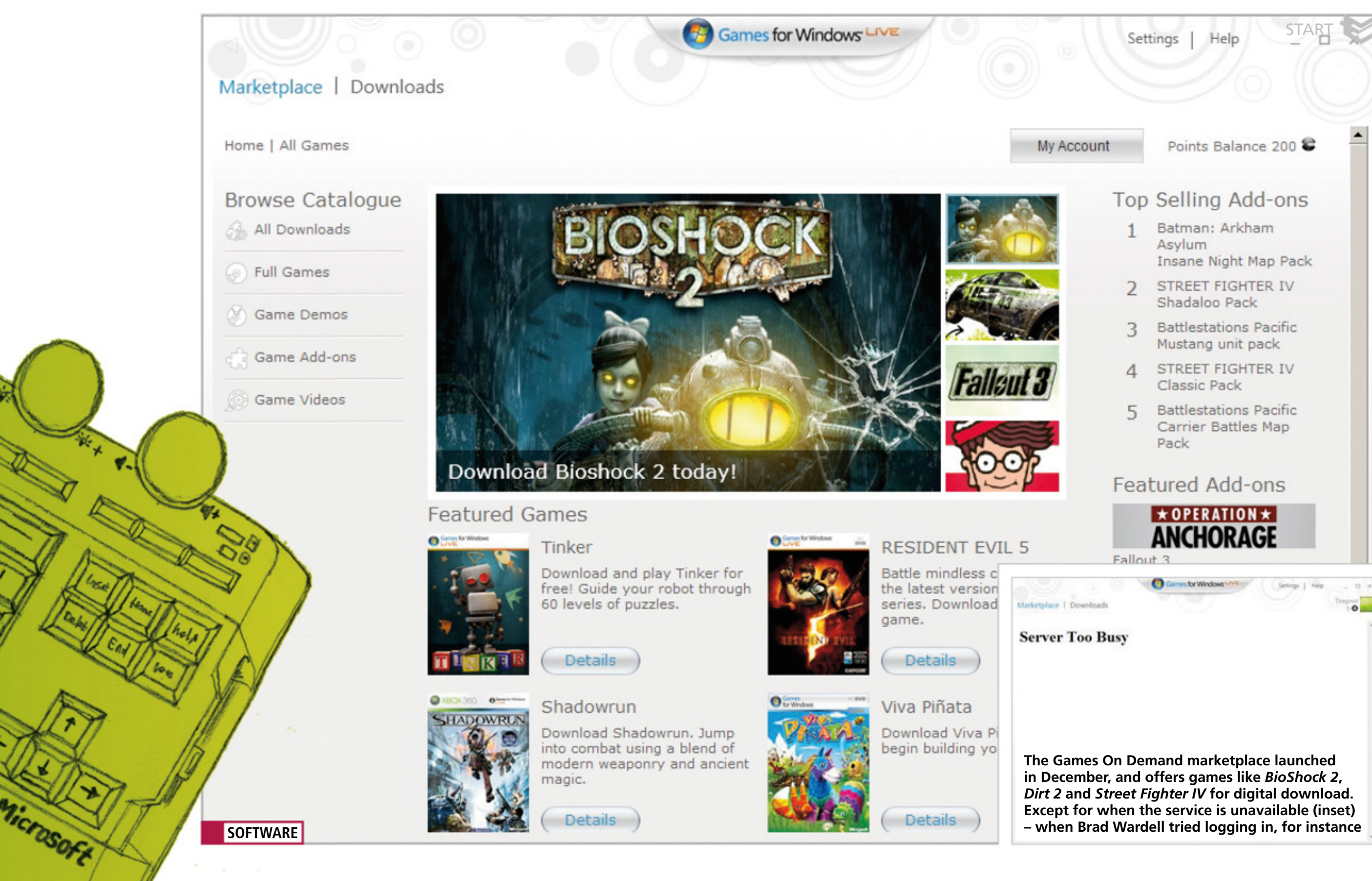


START





Illustration: **Keith Watts/Stem Agency**



The Games On Demand marketplace launched in December, and offers games like *BioShock 2*, *Dirt 2* and *Street Fighter IV* for digital download. Except for when the service is unavailable (inset) – when Brad Wardell tried logging in, for instance

SOFTWARE

Is it time for Live to die?

Microsoft's Games for Windows initiative was supposed to make PC gaming easier, but its cornerstone, Games for Windows Live, is a suffocating mess

PC gaming is famously a muddled, complicated affair. If your only experience of videogames is via consoles, then common PC obstacles like system specifications, graphics drivers, port forwarding and DirectX are going to scare and confuse you. But Microsoft is here to help. In May 2007, shortly after the launch of Windows Vista and with Xbox 360 increasing steadily in popularity, the company launched Games for Windows Live. Part of a larger initiative that includes branding of all PC game boxes and a rating system to simply identify which games your computer is capable of running, it's an application and service that offers online matchmaking, auto-downloading of patches, a downloadable content marketplace and, in some cases, crossplatform play with Xbox 360 users.

Some three years later, Games for Windows Live is on its last legs. The service has been a comprehensive failure, hindering rather than helping PC gamers at every turn and putting more obstacles between players and the games that use it. For an example, you needn't look any further than the recent release of *BioShock 2*. Miscommunication was partly to blame for the furore, but the game's inclusion of Games for Windows Live sparked responses ranging from resigned sighing to screaming frustration. Live may be in its death throes, but its Microsoft-driven influence continues to pervade PC gaming.

"The key mistakes I've seen Games for Windows Live make includes having too many strings attached," says **Brad Wardell**. Wardell is the founder of Stardock, developer of PC games like *Galactic Civilizations*, but also the creator of Impulse, a similar service offering matchmaking and auto-patching to PC gamers. (In the process of assembling this article we asked Microsoft for comment, but received no response.)

"As a developer, I want accounts and achievements, and seamless multiplayer. But I don't want to have to go through some third party to get approval for updates and whatnot"

One of Games for Windows Live's goals was to make patching games with fixes and free official content easier. So rather than players manually having to check for, download and install updates, games that utilised the Live platform would automate the whole process.

"As a developer," explains Wardell, "I want accounts and achievements, and seamless multiplayer. But I don't want to have to go through some third party to get approval for updates and whatnot." In theory, this would make distribution of patches both quicker and easier. It's an incredibly simple goal. In practice? For developers the process is slow, because before you can deliver a patch to your audience it must first pass Microsoft's certification. Quality control might generally be a good thing, but any delays are bad when your game is broken and its players are desperate for a fix. Worse, the process isn't any smoother for gamers, either. First, Live will force players to patch a game even if they only want to play it in singleplayer. If you're dropping in for a quick *Grand Theft Auto IV* mission during a spare hour, tough luck – you may find the hour over before you can even begin playing.

It gets worse. Patch downloads frequently freeze or time out without telling the user, leaving

Fallout 3 DLC such as *Point Lookout* is only officially available in online mode, but the required files – and any saved games that use the DLC – can be copied to the standard *Fallout 3* install directory so that it can be accessed in offline mode

them staring at an unmoving progress bar. Wardell cites "a lack of commitment to quality" as one of the problems with the service, and it's easy to see why. While we're talking, he sends us a screenshot of what Live is displaying as he's logging in: a 'Server Too Busy' error message on the homepage. This is, let us remember, a service that is supposed to cover the vast PC gaming landscape, backed by the resources of the world's biggest software company.

Yet outages have plagued the service since the beginning, with downtime sometimes happening for server maintenance without any warning. This might be a small inconvenience if it only meant that online features like achievements and matchmaking weren't working for the duration, but it's much worse than that.

This is thanks to the bogeyman of PC gaming, for developers at least. One of Games for Windows Live's central aims is to confront and tackle piracy, and to this end it employs various measures to ensure you own a legitimate copy of the game. These include activation limits, but the real problem is a player's online profile.

Online profiles work in much the same way as Xbox Live: you sign up, create a Gamertag and, by being signed in, collect Achievements as you play games. The issue is that, if you start a game while logged in to your account, your saved games are then irrevocably tied to that online profile. If your internet connection is ever unavailable, or if the Games for Windows Live servers aren't working, then those saves are inaccessible. You cannot play your singleplayer game.

There is an offline mode, but instead of being a solution, it introduces a whole new string of regressive issues. Offline mode acts like a separate version of your account, which means that even when you do enter it, saved games created while online remain inaccessible – they are tied to your online ID. If you're wise enough to create your saved games in offline mode to begin with, you'll be unable to use any downloadable content. This means that if you want to continue your *Fallout 3* character from offline saves beyond the end of the game and into the *Point Lookout* DLC, you'll first have to manually copy the saved games into your online profile's save folder.

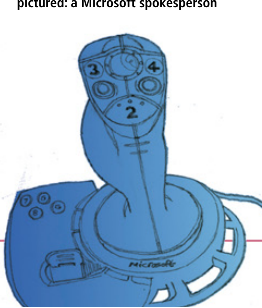
There's even a third mode with *Fallout 3*: you can sign out of Games for Windows Live entirely, exiting both online and offline modes. *Fallout 3* will tell you that saved games and autosaves are disabled until you log back in at that point, yet you can play and save normally. The catch? Saved games created while in this state are invisible to both online and offline modes. That's three different modes in which you can save your progress – progress which is invisible in the other modes. Modes that are inherently internet connection dependent.

If this sounds like a tangled mess, then think back to exactly the kind of thing Games for Windows Live was trying to avoid. "The broad goal we had was combining the world of consoles and PCs," says **Peter Moore**, now at EA Sports but previously VP of Microsoft's entertainment business division as Games for Windows Live launched. "Games for Windows was a way of reinvigorating the PC business by getting the power of Microsoft behind it," Moore adds. "The Games for Windows logos that you still see today on games were about





Brad Wardell (top), CEO of Stardock, and Peter Moore (above), formerly corporate VP of Microsoft's interactive entertainment business division. Not pictured: a Microsoft spokesperson



Shooting troubles

What to try when Games for Windows Live breaks

1. Start by updating your graphics drivers, the most common cause of all PC gaming errors: www.ati.com and www.nvidia.com are the places to go, depending on your particular card manufacturer.

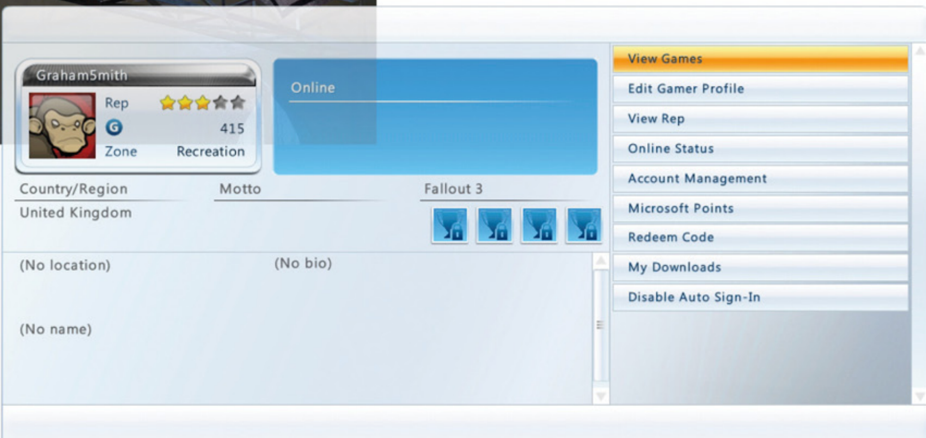
2. Update the operating system with the most recent service pack for Windows via support.microsoft.com/sp, or visit windowsupdate.microsoft.com for any other available updates.

3. If the problem is connection timeouts, it's possible that your router's firewall is blocking the traffic from getting in or out. Open the ports UDP 88 and UDP 3074. Refer to the manual that came with your router if you don't know how.

4. If all else fails, search the official Games for Windows forums at forums.gamesforwindows.com. There are a lot of confusing answers, but some really helpful threads, too.



Batman: Arkham Asylum has freely available downloadable content, but in order to get it or play it through Games for Windows Live you have to be online. Games for Windows Live games like *Fallout 3* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* can be purchased over Steam, but it won't let you escape. Instead, you're able to bring both services' overlays up on top of the game at the same time



bringing a clear, consistent experience that says: 'This game works.'" But while the logos remain at least a unifying brand for PC gaming, by its own goals Games for Windows has failed. Live is the cornerstone of the initiative – the way in which games most directly interact with the project – and it simply doesn't work as it should.

And again in this difficult tale, it gets worse. What is Microsoft doing about these plentiful faults? Very little indeed, apparently. Rather than trying to address the growing damage, December 2009 saw it launch a new feature in the form of Games On Demand, a digital distribution store offering full games for purchase and download.

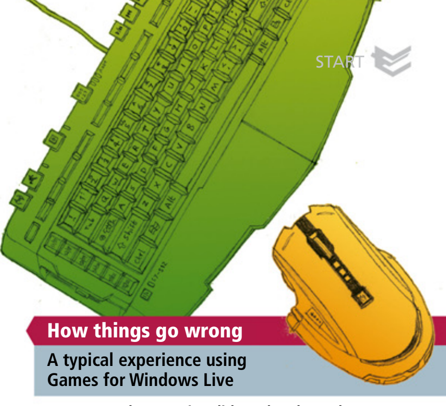
> **Games for Windows has failed. Live is the cornerstone of the initiative – the way in which games most directly interact with the project – and it doesn't work as it should**

Wardell says that Live is sending inconsistent messages, unable to decide whether it's a service or a store: "If I was in charge of Games for Windows Live, I would make it a series of tools and libraries that is a companion to DirectX. I'd eliminate the client and focus on the key tools and services: accounts, Achievements, matchmaking." It's an interesting example, because DirectX is a perfect instance of Microsoft doing things well and PC gaming benefiting from it hugely. First released by Microsoft in 1994, DirectX has grown to allow for faster programming, specifically by making it easier to access the abilities of high-end 3D graphics cards and sound cards, and by making it easier to engineer and manage online multiplayer.

Meanwhile, Live's numerous disappointments are made worse by there already being other services that do everything Games for Windows Live does, only far, far better. "Right now, there are three major platforms for developers and publishers: Steam with Steamworks, Impulse ImpulseReactor and Games for Windows Live," Wardell says. Both Steam and Impulse separate the suite of tools offered to developers – Steamworks and ImpulseReactor respectively – from the client used by players to access community tools and buy digitally downloadable games.

"Each one has its strengths and weaknesses," Wardell says. "Steamworks is, by far, the most mature. It has the most features and services." Games like *Napoleon: Total War* have Achievements and easy matchmaking because its developer, Creative Assembly, makes use of Steamworks. For users, Steam is simply useful. There's an offline mode where saved games are available no matter what mode you were in when you created them. Your downloaded content doesn't disappear if you go offline, and games have no activation limits once purchased. The service rarely experiences downtime, patch releases don't stop you from playing in singleplayer, and you're never fobbed off by obtuse error messages. Steam isn't perfect, but it functions. Stardock's client, Impulse, is similar, and ImpulseReactor will soon be released with new developer-centric features.

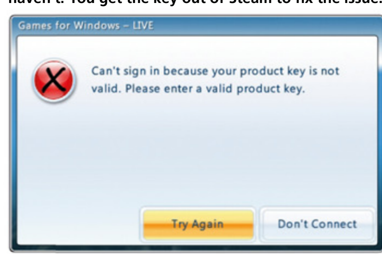
It has been less than three years since Games for Windows Live launched, and it's hard to see which of its original goals it has achieved. While stressing that he no longer works at the company, Moore says: "They're doing their best because it's in Microsoft's best interests to keep the personal computer a strong gaming platform." But Microsoft's best clearly isn't good enough. Designed to make PC gaming easier for the masses, Games for Windows Live has instead added another barrier, and every developer that chooses to use it is complicit in the problems it causes. The service, which results in inconvenience and frustration among everyone who uses it, needs a total rethink – or retirement.



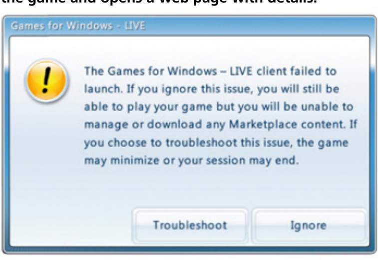
How things go wrong

A typical experience using Games for Windows Live

1. It says you have an invalid product key when you haven't. You get the key out of Steam to fix the issue.



2. You decide to buy the *Operation Anchorhead* DLC. You can't, because the Games for Windows Live client fails to launch. Troubleshooting minimises the game and opens a web page with details.



3. The web page tells you to close the game and to launch the Games for Windows Live client. You maximise the game, quit out and open the client.

Games for Windows - LIVE game enabled game fails to launch the Games for Windows - LIVE Client.

You are viewing this page because an attempt to launch the Games for Windows - LIVE client while you were using an in-game service failed. Games for Windows - LIVE is a required software component for Games for Windows - LIVE games, including some in-game services, and some features will not function properly in your game if the problem is not addressed.

To fix this problem:

1. Exit the Games for Windows - LIVE enabled game you're running.
2. Open Games for Windows - LIVE on your computer.
3. Games for Windows - LIVE will detect the cause of the error and provide details on how to fix the problem.

To launch Games for Windows - LIVE:

- Select **Game For Windows - LIVE** from the **Start** menu or you can find it in your **program files** folder in the following directory:
  \Microsoft Games for Windows - LIVE\Client\GFWLive.exe

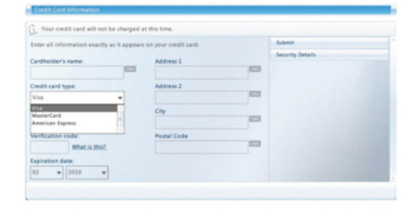
Possible reasons for the failure can be:

1. XP Update required: If you are using the Windows XP operating system, you might not be able to install a software package because the WinVerifyTrust function in Windows XP cannot validate the certificates for large signed files. This problem typically occurs when the signed file is larger than 500 MB. To fix this problem, follow the instructions given here: http://support.microsoft.com/kb/960554
2. .NET requirements are not installed: It is possible that you might not have the required .NET 3.5 SP1 software installed. If not, you can download it here: http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?FamilyID=ab99342f-5d1a-413d-8319-81da479ab0d7&displaylang=en
3. An older version of Games for Windows - LIVE is installed or Games for Windows - LIVE is missing. Please install the latest version by downloading it here: http://go.microsoft.com/?linkid=9640147

If Games for Windows - LIVE successfully addresses the problem, you may resume using the in-game service of your Games for Windows - LIVE enabled game.

If Games for Windows - LIVE has not fixed the problem, consult the forums for more information.

4. You're told to install a Windows hotfix. You do so, then proceed to reboot, but discover that your Maestro debit card isn't accepted in the store…



SOUND BYTES

"I cannot get myself interested in videogames. I've been given videogame players and they just sit there connected to my TVs gathering dust until eventually I unplug them so I can put in another special-region DVD player."
Quentin Tarantino isn't particularly looking forward to *Super Mario Galaxy 2*

"Please find attached a press release for *Achtung Panzer: Kharkov 1943*, arguably the most realistic tank battle simulation releasing from Paradox Interactive at the end of February."
We're wondering how excited we should be about what's being lined up for the beginning of March

"Parents and consumers should know that the game contains a fair amount of 'cheesy', and at times, creepy voyeurism – especially when users have complete rotate-pan-zoom control; but the game also contains bizarre, misguided notions of what women really want (if given two weeks, paid vacation, island resort) – *Paradise* cannot mean straddling felled tree trunks in dental-floss thongs."
The **Entertainment Software Rating Board** offers its initial guidance on Tecmo's saucy little PSP holiday sim, *Dead Or Alive: Paradise*

"While we will not deny the fact that this title offers voyeuristic appeal, we do not mention or use phrases such as 'creepy', 'dental-floss thongs', 'bizarre' or 'misguided notions' in any part of our ESRB rating submission materials."
Tecmo responds, perhaps while considering a new marketing campaign for its game

"The rating summary for *Dead Or Alive Paradise* was posted to our website in error, and we have since replaced that version with the corrected one."
That's either the sound of a bus backing up or it's the **ESRB** again



INTERVIEW

Microsoft in motion

Aaron Greenberg explains where the future of Xbox lies and how he foresees Project Natal guiding the industry's evolution

Microsoft director of product management **Aaron Greenberg** is in a reflective mood as the company showcases its slate of upcoming games at the X10 event in San Francisco. While there is no Natal on display and no big announcements (Game Room was revealed at CES in January), the tone remains one of assured confidence in a line-up that will comprise the backbone of Xbox 360's year. A good opportunity, then, to get the lie of the land from inside the corporation on where it is today, where it thought it would be, and where it's heading.

Where is Xbox 360 right now in terms of the road map Microsoft laid out for it?
You never know exactly how that road is going to pan out. You have a vision. What's interesting about our team is that these people have a real passion for innovating, for pioneering. These are not people who play it safe. I think we showed that when we launched the original Xbox, building in a hard drive, adding Xbox Live, integrating chat, and betting on broadband. These were things that a lot of our partners were against at the time, saying things like "no one wants to talk over their games" and that we have to do dial-up because broadband penetration isn't there. That pioneering spirit remains, and I think we showed that with the New Xbox Experience. Xbox Live was seen as by far the best online console experience – no one was asking us to redo the whole thing.

"We think Project Natal is another great experience. Sure, we could have done a motion controller if we wanted to, but that's not who we are. We're a team that makes big bets"

We think Project Natal is another great experience. Sure, we could have done a motion controller if we wanted to, but that's not who we are. We're a team that makes big bets. Natal is a big bet, and we think it's a game-changer. We don't want to do a lot of little things, we want to bet big on things that really matter.

We got to play with Natal at E3 and saw that it works. Now Peter Molyneux is saying that on day one you'll get what you expect. But what should we expect in three or four years?
The potential is tremendous, and we have thought out the portfolio years in advance. We do a lot of planning that people may not think goes into this business that we take very seriously. I think people will be surprised even in the first year by the variety of experiences you'll get. The beauty of Natal is that it brings you, male or female, young or old, an experience that everyone can enjoy. Whether it's game experiences or lifestyle experiences, everything we're doing in the design is about thinking of a way anyone can step in front of it and be able to use it in a matter of seconds.

We're focusing now on not teaching humans how to use technology, but trying to use technology to learn how humans work, making the technology invisible in many ways. That's the magic of the experience.

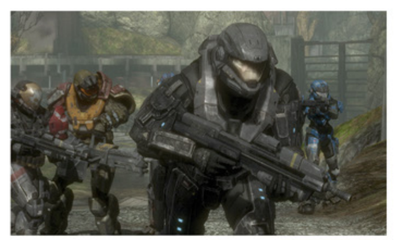
What has thirdparty reaction been like?
I think they know we have a pretty good track record. Obviously you never get everyone, especially out of the gate. But over 70 per cent of thirdparties that are selling games today are actively making games for Project Natal. That's impressive for something so new, that doesn't even have an installed base yet. A couple of things play into that: people know we're a software company, we have the best tools and internal support; and second, people who buy Xbox 360 buy a lot of games. Thirdparties have really thrived on our platform. Look at Wii – while it's done really well, thirdparties have struggled, so we've left a lot of room for people to believe in the ecosystem, and Natal is a part of that.

Will the first products that appear be in the form of Natal-only or Natal-enhanced?
Our focus for launch is on original experiences, built from the ground up for Natal. We believe that's important because the first impression has to be a magical one. But because we expect millions and millions of these things to be sold this Christmas, over time developers will know millions of customers have these sensors so they can add this functionality to their games. So you may see some hybrid approaches, but our initial focus is on those unique experiences.

Does the focus on 'apps' for Live and Natal mean a commitment to appealing to the less dedicated part of Xbox 360's audience?
Live over the last couple of years has been about adding more of the entertainment experiences and social networking functionality,







Aaron Greenberg (top) naturally expects big things from Natal, but there are other things happening in Xbox 360 world in 2010, such as Game Room (centre) and *Halo Reach* (above)

which does appeal to the more mainstream consumer – other members of the household. Natal plays a role there, as our vision is that anyone can navigate the interface, using their voice, their hands – they shouldn't have to pick up a controller to play a movie or listen to music. That level of accessibility has never really been done before in our industry.

Will web browsing ever figure in that plan?
No, we really believe that the web browsing experience on TV is a poor one, and the real magic is to take those web experiences and optimise them for the living room. That's what we did with Netflix. So, sure, you can go on the PS3 and go to Facebook and try to navigate, but it's an absolute nightmare. No disrespect, there's things I love about PS3, but that's not one of them. We want the online experience to be fun and optimised for the living room, and we'll continue to add more applications to get more richness.

How long does it take from concept to launch for an application like Netflix?
About a year, sometimes longer. We had a number of conversations with folks at Netflix, and they were looking at ways to grow their digital offerings, so we were a perfect fit. What we got out with NXE was great, but then we heard from the community that "we want to add to our queue", or "we want to navigate more stuff". So we went back, added the Netflix 2.0 experience, and made it better.

Does the reality of digital downloads make questions about Blu-ray uptake moot?
We've just taken a different strategy. Sony bet on the physical disc, and there are costs associated with that. The fact that we're able to offer a console starting at $199 is a benefit of not being burdened with that cost. Being $100 cheaper is part of the reason why we're nearly twice their installed base. For us, our bet was on digital distribution, that that was the future – the ability to do 1080p movies with no disc, no download required; we have the largest movie and TV library, the largest HD library of any console.

Sure, there are trade-offs, but the convenience of pushing a button and watching a movie instantly is, we think, pretty appealing. The great thing is that we built the heart of the Xbox 360 for continuous innovation. We can always add more features and functionality, and you don't have to buy new hardware to do that. You can do it through software updates. So someone who buys a 360 today can know that one, two, or three years from now they will get a whole variety of new experiences that make it better through Xbox Live. That sort of thing has never existed before in our industry.

Newswire



Return of the ninja master

Ninja Gaiden **director and ex-Team Ninja figurehead Tomonobu Itagaki has settled with previous employer Tecmo out of court after just under two years in the legal system. Itagaki left Tecmo in 2008 and has since been off the radar. The dispute, over "unpaid completion of bonuses" for** ***Dead Or Alive 4*** **and "unreasonable and disingenuous statements" by then president Yoshimi Yasuda, ended by mutual consent, though there's been no word on a settlement. Itagaki went on to announce his latest endeavour, Valhalla Game Studios, an outfit of about 50 people. He's heading up its development department, and the studio is being run by Satoshi Kanematsu, also ex-Tecmo. Expect news on their first project soon.**







INTERVIEW

Recreating a monster

Monster Hunter Tri might seem an odd match for the Wii Fit generation, but Ryozo Tsujimoto and Kaname Fujioka tell us how it falls into place

Deep within the London Science Museum on a bitterly cold morning, guards in suits of armour lead the assembled press to their seats for the official European reveal of *Monster Hunter Tri*. At face value, it's a fittingly decadent event for a game which, in the space of six months in Japan alone, has already become the third bestselling thirdparty title on Wii. However, such opulence seems markedly out of place in a territory where the *Monster Hunter* series has traditionally failed to replicate its native successes. During a rare pause in the festivities, series producer (and son of Capcom CEO Kenzo Tsujimoto) **Ryozo Tsujimoto** and director **Kaname Fujioka** sat down to discuss their hopes of how a strategic redesign – and Nintendo's marketing budget – may change all that.


Tsujimoto is confident that the change of platform from PSP to Wii will make *Monster Hunter Tri* a success in European regions

Nintendo is investing significantly in *Monster Hunter Tri* in the UK – why do you feel your game can have that wider appeal when previous series entries haven't?
Ryozo Tsujimoto: From the very start, we considered what choices we could make to appeal to international audiences and one of the most important factors we determined was the choice of format. Now, the PSP works well for the series in Japan because people are more likely to arrange to meet in a park or while travelling on a train, and just play together. In fact, online take-up of *Monster Hunter* is poor within Japan, because this isn't the predominant way in which the Japanese public digests its games. In the UK, people are more inclined to see home console gaming as their primary source of gaming, so we made a decision to move *Monster Hunter* to the big screen.

Incorporating Wii Speak and removing the need for Friend Codes seems to indicate the importance of online to the potential success of *Monster Hunter Tri* in the UK.
RT: It's important to the series because the fundamental idea of *Monster Hunter* is for real people to meet, form packs and go hunting together. So it's essential that the player can locate new potential teammates quickly and easily, and we felt that the existing Friend Code system wasn't conducive to that. Wii Speak was an important addition because we know that's what UK players are used to and expect from their online experiences. We don't think this audience would take to the existing text-based system.

In that respect, the original decision to move the title from PS3 to Wii seems a bit unusual. What was the motivation behind the switch?
Kaname Fujioka: An increase in technology brings with it new challenges as you implement it, but it doesn't allow you to change the playing


In an attempt to encourage player experimentation, the new 'instincts' feature means that different species will react in different ways. So if you wave a flame at a monster, its reaction could vary from fleeing the scene, to being drawn to the light, to doing a dance for you

OUT THERE



THONGS IN EBAY FLURRY

If eBay user lace_thongs35 knew the kind of attention her latest online offering was going to attract, she might have put on a username a little less skimpy. Things began innocently enough, with the setting up of an auction for her children's old NES and five games found gathering dust in a closet. The system, minus power cord and composite cable, ended up selling for $13,105, roughly $13,104 of which can be accounted for by one of the games on offer, a copy of *Stadium Events*, released in 1987 and almost immediately recalled. Thongs' boxed copy is reported to be one of only ten in existence. Well, hello.











Fujioka is keen to extol the virtues of the 'cubic' mechanics of the underwater sections (above). A new dimension is added to the arena of conflict, creating a huge number of new tactical possibilities, without significantly altering the basic DNA of the game design

style. Although the preferred control system is still the Classic Controller, the chance to experiment with the new controller was a big draw towards moving development towards the Wii, and offers lots of potential for the future.

Can *Tri* increase Wii's online takeup here?
KF: We think so, yes, but a lot of that will depend upon the marketing.

> **"The Barroth creature was based on the design of a construction vehicle we saw in Japan. Once you've been mowed down by one, the similarities will become a lot more obvious"**

Have you considered charging for monthly play? Do you think fans would pay?
RT: Talks about this are still ongoing with Nintendo. Nothing's decided. We can't say much more about it than that at the moment.

***Monster Hunter*'s success outside of Japan has been called "a five-year project" – how do you think the series is doing so far?**
RT: The five-year project is still ongoing, and we consider *Monster Hunter Tri* to be an important milestone in attaining that target. The project was very much in our minds when we began work on *Tri* and much of the changes we implemented were in order to open the series up and make it more accessible. Where are we on that scale? I'd say between two and three years.

Have you learned anything from the game's launch in Japan that you think might help with the UK release?
KT: We were pleased with how the Japanese launch went. The feedback from both the Japanese public and the press was very positive – they found the changes we'd implemented, in particular the ecology system, to be very refreshing. The good thing about staggered releases is that we get the chance to see how the game goes down and then implement changes, but on this occasion, we feel we've got things right. We think it'll go down very well.

When you're putting together a design for one of the game's many types of monsters, where do you look for inspiration?
RT: We're heavily influenced by the dinosaur kingdom, and we guess that's pretty evident in the series' aesthetics as a whole. Having said that, we draw inspiration from almost everywhere, including the natural world, mythology and even less conventional sources.

As an example, the Barroth creature was based on the design of a construction vehicle we saw in Japan. These machines are used to transport soil from one area to another. Once you've been mowed down by one when you're playing *Monster Hunter*, the similarities will become a lot more obvious.

Right now, what do you think gamers outside of Japan think of when they hear the *Monster Hunter* series being discussed?
KF: We think it's still seen as a very niche product that's only popular in Japan. Our hope is that this perception will change very soon.



INTERVIEW



The kingmaker

We talk to Lionhead chief Peter Molyneux about the UK studio's upcoming Fable III

With a career in the game industry spanning nearly 30 years, **Peter Molyneux**'s CV is crammed with titles that investigate and celebrate themes of power and influence. Now, he reveals, it's time to unleash your inner tyrant.

***Fable*. *Fable II*. We should know what to expect to see in *Fable III*, right?**
We should be brave. And what *Fable III* is for me is making you feel powerful. The conventional story of conventional games, movies and books is called the hero's journey. They start as a character who is fairly weak. After two-and-a-half minutes, a big baddie does something awful to you – this could be the *Fable II* story, by the way – you then spend umpteen hours levelling up so you can take the big baddie on, save the day, and then the worst thing happens – the credits roll. "Hey, man, I just spent umpteen hours getting to a position to beat the big baddie – surely I should have the luxury of being in control?" And that's what *Fable III* is about.

At what point do you get to wield this power?
It's all about getting people to believe in you and follow you, and making promises necessary so they will follow you. Then you take on that big bad guy, Logan, overthrowing the evil tyrant king and become king yourself. And that's the halfway point of the game.

So would you say that half of the game is playing the politics of power?
We're going to give you the power to decide how many of those promises you made on the journey to being king you're going to keep. There's kids that go to work in the factories – which happened in the 1820s in England – and people will come up and ask you if you'll eradicate this child labour and ask if you'll sign this piece of paper to say you're committed to that policy. Promises are easy. But when you become king, that's when you're going to feel the consequences of those promises – you have to let people down.

The previous *Fable*s touched on exerting influence via expressions…
To be honest, expressions in *Fable I* and *Fable II* was about farting, let's be honest. And people loved it, especially English people, who love a good fart joke. It probably sold an extra 50,000 copies just by having a fart expression. But that wasn't our dream of what an expression was.



Despite Molyneux's references to Henry VIII, and our bigamy in *Fable II*, it remains to be seen if part three will allow you to split from Rome and establish your own church

How do the new layers of character interaction feed into exerting influence?
The new mechanic is called 'touch', and I'll be completely honest, it was inspired by *Ico*. When you use the right trigger, the most applicable thing happens to the thing you're facing. In one example, I'll tell off my daughter because she's been naughty and ran away from home. But now she's really upset, so if I use the right trigger again, I'll comfort her. How does this make you feel? This is my daughter. I can hug her, I can throw her, make her happy. It's all about that touch mechanic. I can now take her home, but how? I use the trigger again and can reach out my hand, and lead her.

> **"'Hey, man, I just spent umpteen hours getting to a position to beat the big baddie – surely I should have the luxury of being in control.' And that's what Fable III is about"**

What's your personal perspective on monarchies?
I'm fascinated by the corruption of monarchy, especially the British monarchy. Look at Henry VIII, he just wanted to get married again, so he said that God doesn't exist any more, let's have a new one. That's a tyrant. That's a monarch. I want you to feel like everything from Idi Amin to Che Guevara. Let's look at Obama. That guy made all those promises on the journey to rule. He said he was going to close Guantanamo Bay, and to me, that's making a phone call and closing that place. A year later, where are we? It's still open. It just seems wrong. And that's why that feeling of power and responsibility is a current story even though it's set over a hundred years ago.

Molyneux says that *Fable III* will reward you with the luxury of being the king and ruling the land, once you defeat your enemies





INTERVIEW

Häkkinen (right) suggests that there's a lot of freedom in how you traverse the game's environment – much more than was evident when we played a small section of it (see p30)





Wake's progress

We talk to Remedy as its new game emerges from the dark

Alan Wake's been around the block. Announced before the launch of Xbox 360, much of its lengthy development has been conducted under a veil of silence. As the NDAs finally expire, it turns out that Remedy's thriller has undergone a couple of U-turns, ditching the open-world premise and transforming into a more tightly controlled but efficient cinematic thriller. We caught up with **Oskari Häkkinen**, Remedy's head of franchise development, to find out more.

Alan Wake now feels quite different from the original proposition.
The high concept hasn't changed at any point – we knew that we wanted to do a character-centric, story-driven singleplayer experience. One of the main changes would be the open world. We realised very quickly in the development stage that it wasn't going to work with a thriller. You need to be able to control the pacing to tap into the emotions of the player. Having a sandbox, we didn't have the control we wanted, so we went for a more linear experience. But this has worked to our advantage – it isn't a sandbox, but it is built on open-world technology, allowing us to make the path relatively wide and long at times. The player doesn't feel like he's being pulled by a string.

> **"It isn't a sandbox, but it is built on open-world technology, allowing us to make the path relatively wide and long at times. The player doesn't feel pulled by a string"**

So, what we've played so far isn't indicative of the freedom you'll have later on? It felt quite restricted.
The tutorial you have was designed to keep a very tight path because we want to teach the player how to use the light and the dodge and so forth – but certainly, the further you go into the game, the more it opens up.



Alan Wake has been in development for a long while, but the game has in fact been playable from start to finish since May 2009, according to Häkkinen. A wealth of cinematic sequences and other elements have since been added

Was it a difficult decision to hold the game back and polish it for as long as you have?
Yeah, it's been a long process. But a labour of love. We were in a fortunate situation after the *Max Payne* games – due to their success, we could take our time with this project. We didn't foresee that this project would take so long, but what we did know is that we could only be as good as our latest game. So we always knew we wouldn't put it out until it was ready. This has been our baby, our masterpiece.

Alan Wake's structured like episodes of a TV serial. Does this imply that 'season two' is going to be delivered in pieces, or will it take the form of a standalone sequel?
We've always thought of *Alan Wake* as being a bigger thing than just the one game. So when you get *Alan Wake* in your hands, you can think of this as season one. We'll have a satisfactory and conclusive ending, but we'll leave some doors open: we've planned for a bigger story arc. And we've thought of DLC, which will be more of a bridge between season one and season two, should this first part be a success. You can think of the DLC like a Christmas special, something that will give you a different perspective on the stuff you've played in season one.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

It's a tough job, but someone wants to do it: playthroughs of every console-based survival-horror title. Ever. And it's not just for posterity, because each title is marked off the list and added to an already bulging database, often complete with commentary, verdict and potentially awarded statuses as "Quest Worthy". Missing titles can even be donated to the cause by post. One criterion for a "Horror Quest" title is outlined as possessing the "intent to scare", a loose, personalised parameter that leads to an inexplicable segregation of _Dino Crisis_ and its sequel. Still, anyone who can manage a playthrough of _The X-Files: Resist Or Serve_ and live to blog about the experience afterwards definitely has our vote.



Site:
Chris' Survival Horror Quest
URL:
www.dreamdawn.com/sh



Sid Meier's Civilization V

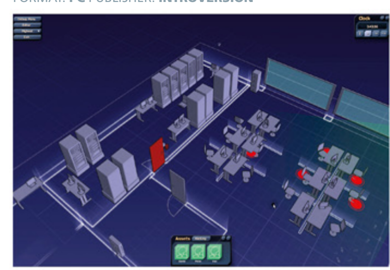
FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**



It's a brave new world for Firaxis' sequel: new engine, new combat, deeper diplomacy and a "cavalcade of expanded features". But the real revolution should be the hexagonal tiles

Subversion

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **INTROVERSION**



Options in this high-tech thriller: "Sabotage, social engineering, custom mechanical devices, distractions, hacking, trickery, stealth acrobatics, precision demolitions, whatever gets the job done"

Amnesia: The Dark Descent

FORMAT: **MAC, PC** PUBLISHER: **TBA**



Penumbra developer Frictional Games is holding content for its new survival-horror to ransom: you first have to fill the website's "preorder-o-meter" up with blood (aka 2,000 preorders placed)

Dead Rising 2: Case Zero

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



Bridging the gap between games one and two is *Case Zero*, a downloadable prologue arriving later in the year. Introducing hero Chuck Greene, you won't need either retail game to play it

Stargate Worlds

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **TBA**



The latest chapter in the saga: sadly, it looks like Chapter 11 bankruptcy for developer Cheyenne Mountain. Legal disputes don't help, though "upgrades" continue for *Stargate Resistance*

Mount & Blade: Warband

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **PARADOX INTERACTIVE**



The much-anticipated expansion enters the open world, and any owner of a valid *Mount & Blade* serial number can join. The key addition is 32-person multiplayer, supported by myriad upgrades

Sonic The Hedgehog 4: Episode 1

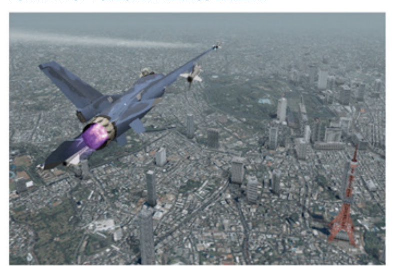
FORMAT: **360, PS3, WII** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



The game that was Project Needlemouse is, as many suspected, a direct sequel to 1994's *Sonic & Knuckles*. A new trailer announces online leaderboards, classic power-ups and an ETA of summer

Ace Combat: Joint Assault

FORMAT: **PSP** PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**



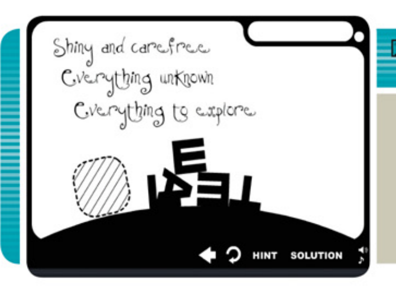
We'll believe the claim of a "complete redesign" when we see it, which, according to Namco, will be in the summer. Much rests on the game's new Enhanced Combat View and "multi-strategic AI"

Fallout: New Vegas

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA**



To look at some features here, you'd think someone had been eyeing the *Fallout 3* mod scene. A Hardcore mode adds *Stalker*-esque survival play and locations including the Hoover Dam



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Prose And Motion

tinyurl.com/y888qqg

If there's one thing Countdown's missing, it's physics puzzles. If, like us, you've always felt the boring numbers bits would be better replaced by a section in which contestants had to physically arrange that week's conundrum on an awkwardly sloped surface, perhaps to a background of sedate jazz, you'll find a lot to like in Mofunzone's *Prose And Motion*.

The player uses their cursor to pick up weighted letters and spell out words across the monochrome, and often unstable, topography of *Prose And Motion*'s 24 levels. Solutions have a prescribed starting point, forcing the player to confront the often fiendish intricacies of each level's design. Any word, providing it uses all the letters on offer, will solve a level, but in order to find the 'perfect solution' to each challenge, players must decipher the oblique (on occasion, too oblique) clues which float in the background to each puzzle. *Prose And Motion*'s blend of verbal reasoning and physics might be a touch too fiddly for everyone's taste, but it's certainly rentediff.



In association with Screen Digest

Publishers look to digital for growth

Piers Harding-Rolls examines how online is on the up

The global boxed games market declined by seven per cent in dollar value in 2009 following an admittedly spectacular 2008. Much of this decline was related to the lifecycle of mature platforms in the market, which saw falling software sales, but some of the softness can be blamed on competing sectors, especially in the casual gamer space. The transition from physical to digital distribution of products and services began in the mid-'90s, but now it appears that we're reaching a tipping point, where online and mobile's share of the gaming opportunity is likely to grow substantially over the next five years.

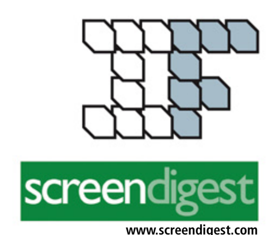
Expect 2010 to see more activity from traditional console game publishers as they prepare for the coming transition and jostle for position within online gaming's many sectors

Traditional publishers are responding, and in the last couple of years we've seen an acceleration in their exposure to digital activity. The standout piece of business was Activision's merger with Blizzard and Vivendi Games to create Activision Blizzard, a company now majority owned by Vivendi Universal, the French-based media conglomerate. Following the merger, Activision's digital business went from almost nothing to $1bn overnight, such was the success of Blizzard's *World Of Warcraft*. This has propelled Activision to near the top of the traditional publisher league in terms of revenue generated from online business models. A substantial 28 per cent of the company's 2009 revenues came from subscription services and licensing, a huge share compared to other US publishers.

While Blizzard has given Activision an enormous boost in digital revenues, across its traditional publishing business there is still much to do. There have been inroads made into the online console business, which now generates a good amount of incremental revenue from sales of song packs for


***World Of Warcraft* still leads the way in game revenue, and the search continues at other publishers for the next big MMORPG**







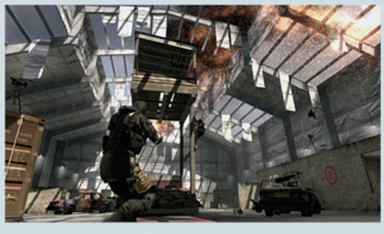
The *Guitar Hero* series has provided Activision with a valuable foothold in the online market through strong DLC sales

Guitar Hero and map packs for *Call Of Duty* titles, but Activision is yet to really expose its business to opportunities outside of these titles.

In contrast, Electronic Arts has been active across quite a few online and mobile sectors. In recent years, the company has acquired a number of businesses to ramp up its activities in mobile games, PC casual games, MMOGs and, more recently, social network games. Although this digital strategy is perhaps the most evolved of all the traditional publishers, the scale of revenues it generates is half that of Activision's, underlining the challenges that publishers face in generating decent scale in what is a fragmented market. While the combined market for online games is a substantial one, without the help of a one-off title such as *World Of Warcraft*, the fact that it is made up of a number of different sectors means it's a bigger challenge to get substantial momentum behind the online business compared to the established but declining boxed games sector.

Other major publishers are playing catch-up with Activision and EA. Last year, Ubisoft revealed its intention to evolve its digital business and has earmarked 2010 for the launch of a number of initiatives. These include the launch of browser-based MMOG *Heroes Of Might And Magic*, of Ubiworld, a virtual world for girls, and of Uplay, a portal for gamers which offers the company's PC titles in download form.

However, delivering on these strategies will take wholesale changes from a product-based business to a company more tuned for service delivery. This transformation will take time to achieve and means that material contributions to Ubisoft's top-line revenues from digital initiatives are unlikely to be significant within the next couple of years. THQ continues to work on its *Warhammer 40K* MMOG, while Square Enix already has exposure to this sector through *Final Fantasy XI Online* and is working on the follow-up. Expect 2010 to see more activity from traditional console game publishers as they prepare themselves for the coming transition and jostle for position within online gaming's many sectors.



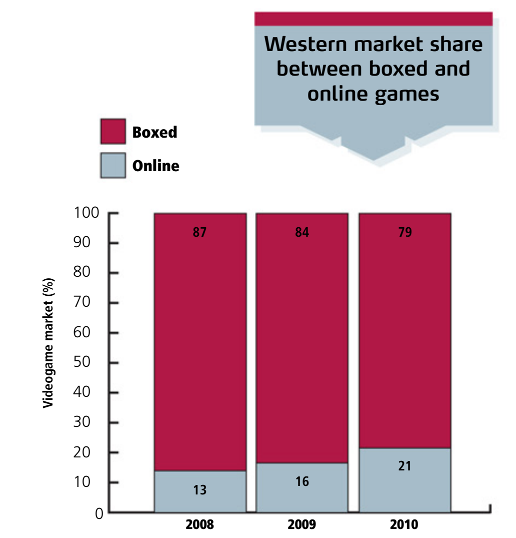


DLC, such as *Call Of Duty*'s map packs, is becoming more than just an added bonus – many consumers have come to expect it

Most recent digital and mobile share of total reported revenue

Company	Digital revenue (%)
Square Enix	32
Activision Blizzard	28
EA	11
Ubisoft	2
THQ	2

(Screen Digest estimates and interpretation of company accounts)

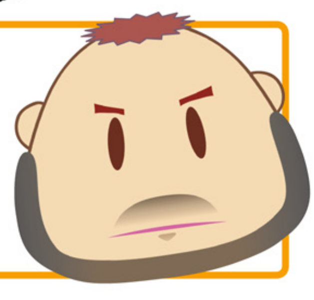


Source: Screen Digest

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

A blockbusting dilemma

Brick Bardo thinks James Cameron's Avatar might be a bridge too far for Japan's island industry



Avatar has turned into a smash hit around the world and is still gaining big audience figures in Japanese cinemas today. Of course, it's two months now since its release, so fewer people are going to watch it, which is quite normal. But the IMAX 3D cinema is still filled day after day with people who want to discover and enjoy that experience in 3D. Maybe it's due to the small number of these cinemas located in Japan – just four of them.

Avatar has been claimed as the champion of a movie industry that wants to enjoy a revolution. But there are also those who aren't so excited by it – and I'm one of them. I'm no 20th Century Fox fanboy, nor am I an *Avatar: The Game* lover, but I'll admit there is indeed something special about the movie and its success story. It made me feel comfortable, reassured, safe. Why did Avatar do so well in Japan, especially at a time when overseas movies aren't generally popular? A few years back, any movies that were successful overseas enjoyed the same level of success in Japan as well. That was a kind of rule ten years ago. Since then, a trend has grown where overseas hits have struggled here. In contrast, home-grown Japanese movies have begun to gain in strength and overcome their Hollywood counterparts.

In recent years we've had Transformers: Revenge Of The Fallen, for example. Neither an especially good or bad movie by any means, this international smash hit was ranked as number one in its first week of release worldwide – well, if you took Japan out of the equation. During that week a locally made movie named Rookies was at the top in Japan. It's an adaptation of a manga about baseball published in Shonen Jump, and it went on to top the Japanese box office rankings for 2009, which were as follows (Avatar will be accounted for in the rankings for 2010):

1. Rookies
2. Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince
3. Red Cliff Part II
4. Michael Jackson: This Is It
5. Pokémon Diamond & Pearl
6. 20th Century Shonen
7. WALL-E
8. Evangelion
9. 2012
10. Amalfi

Japanese productions like Rookies, 20th Century Shonen and Amalfi are all made by TV companies that produce and promote them. They waste no time placing an ad for their movies in their daily TV schedules. The fact that those movies succeed isn't necessarily because of their content – which, to be honest, can't compete with a big-budget movie – but more because of the constant support they get. Meanwhile, stylish and action-orientated Hollywood movies from overseas haven't met with much success.

This is all reminiscent of what we used to call the Galapagos Syndrome in our mobile phone industry. This is the evolution that takes place in answer to the local demands and needs of Japanese consumers, to the point where you get a technology gap between your region and the rest of the world, and subsequently you're unable to sell your technology elsewhere.

This kind of phenomenon is not only true for hardware but software and other culture, too. The Galapagos Syndrome is now spreading to our videogame industry. Games from overseas have a hard time in Japan and our games find fewer releases outside the country. Worse still, our games are experiencing a local Galapagos Syndrome as they're getting more and more otaku-oriented. What sells in Japan are popular names that everyone knows about like *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy* and *Mario*.

Similarly, until Avatar was released, there was the risk that we had a widening difference in taste between Japanese movies and the rest of the world – a Galapagos effect. Distributing overseas blockbusters in Japan costs a lot of money and this is no surprise. But if you pay a lot of money and your product is unsuccessful, Japanese movie companies will be less likely to buy those licences in the future. Move that to the videogame industry, and less money would therefore be spent localising overseas games. It's a vicious circle that closes very quickly with commercial failure.

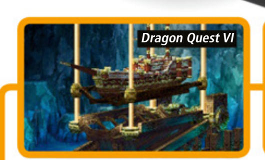
The issue is about hobbies and tastes or, simply put, what people enjoy. That is why the fact that Avatar did also very well in Japan is a source of such comfort to me. It's an American IP that managed to bridge the cultural gap.

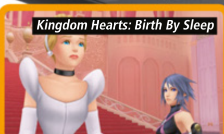
But, at the same time, looking at the investment and level of quality that comes with a project created on such an enormous scale, I can't help but feel a bit concerned. Are there many companies that can achieve a similar level of quality? The answer is, without doubt, no. We have to take a moment just to admire the stunning visuals. Just take the creature design and lighting effects. Such quality is only possible because of James Cameron's long history in the field of 3D special effects. It's certainly a wonder to behold and like nothing I've ever experienced in a movie theatre. I don't know anyone else who could deliver that kind of quality.

Should Avatar become the standard for the future of the entertainment industry, I don't see the global movie and gaming industry capable of following in its steps. Worryingly, that leaves us with just the scattered niche markets

Should Avatar become the standard for the coming future of the entertainment industry, I don't see the global movie and gaming industry capable of following in its steps. Worryingly, that leaves us with just the scattered niche markets.

The movie Avatar is, in terms of the science-fiction genre, a masterpiece that will be remembered as a milestone. I really think it's a great movie. I love it. But at the same time, the bar has now been raised so high that I can't think anything other than to say well done, James Cameron... it's all your fault.


Dragon Quest VI


Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep

Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales: January 25–February 14

Game/monthly sales/lifetime sales
1. ***Dragon Quest VI*** (Square Enix, DS): 1,178,740 (NE)
2. ***God Eater*** (Bandai Namco, PSP): 380,904 (NE)
3. ***New Super Mario Bros Wii*** (Nintendo, Wii): 210,784 (3,329,241)
4. ***Eye Of Eternity*** (Sega, PS3): 166,704 (NE)
5. ***Tomodachi Collection*** (Nintendo, DS): 145,420 (2,857,866)
6. ***Star Ocean 4 International*** (Square Enix, PS3): 108,625
7. ***Ar Tonerico 3*** (Bandai Namco, PS3): 95,017
8. ***Wii Fit Plus*** (Nintendo, Wii): 81,786 (1,635,621)
9. ***Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep*** (Square Enix, PSP): 54,033 (698,938)
10. ***Wii Sports Resort*** (Nintendo, Wii): 42,600 (1,762,486)

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

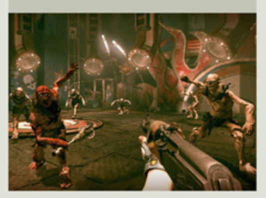
Edge's most wanted

Red Dead Redemption



If the thought of more Euphoria-enhanced gunplay alone doesn't excite you, how about more of it in multiplayer? We'll see how many people this town is big enough for.
360, PS3, ROCKSTAR

Rage



Beyond Thunderdome was on the TV, and reminded us of Barter Town shot through with that id feel. Made us want to shoot through mutants with that id feel, too.
360, PC, PS3, ID SOFTWARE

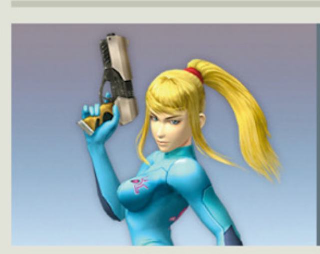
Aliens: Colonial Marines



Gearbox certainly has the chops and back catalogue to rise to the challenge, but the franchise burden is heavy. If it disappoints, everyone will hear us scream.
TBC, SEGA

A problem like Varia

Where is Nintendo going with Metroid?



One of the less salubrious aspects of Samus' constant reinvention is her increasingly revealing attire. The jumpsuit may cover more than the bikini of old, but she does tend to spend more time in it

Metroid: Other M not only marks the fourth game in the *Metroid* series which Nintendo has avoided designing in-house, but the second major rethink the series has undergone in eight years. Having successfully outsourced the *Prime* iterations of Samus' adventures, production duties have now passed into the hands of Tecmo's Team Ninja, and what was a successful firstperson adventure franchise has become a 2.5D shooting brawler. By contrast, *Mario* and *Zelda* found their places in the 3D landscape with much greater speed and certainty.

Quite why a company so talented at translating its core IP into the third dimension has avoided *Metroid* is a mystery. Perhaps it's the female lead? Nintendo tends to prefer saving princesses, not outfitting them in space armour and pitting them against the universe. It's possible that, having realised *Zelda* in 3D so faultlessly, Nintendo wanted to avoid producing another title in the action-adventure mould now that *Metroid*'s fundamental identifying feature – the side-on view – has been stripped away. With the *Prime* series, perhaps the company was attempting to cater to western tastes – *Metroid* was the one IP at Nintendo's disposal capable of being seamlessly entered into the FPS genre.

So what to make of *Other M*'s retraction back to a native studio? The elements of the game – 2D platforming and an acrobatic, agile lead – suggest a title more attuned to the east. After conquering the west so boldly in recent years, is Nintendo looking homewards? And what would, we wonder, an exclusively Nintendo-developed modern action game be like?

Not that the company's willingness to tinker with such a core franchise should be considered a bad thing – its partnership with Retro produced two of the finest GameCube titles. While it's hard to deny that familiarity is a core component of a new *Mario* or *Zelda*'s success, it feels right that one of Nintendo's IPs should shoulder the responsibility of trying something new. However successful the finished game turns out to be, *Other M* has cemented reinvention as the central concept of the *Metroid* franchise, and shows that, just as when she emerged from that androgynous armour in 1986, Samus hasn't lost her capacity to surprise.

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MAY 23 (US), JUNE 11 (UK)**

Super Mario Galaxy 2

In which Nintendo sets out to prove that much of Mario's universe remains unexplored, after all



Super Mario Galaxy 2. One of those titles that tell you all you need to know. More of the same? Certainly. But then, when more of the same means more of the first game's unbridled creativity, more chunks of the purest platforming in years suspended in a starry sky, and more unashamed joy in simply being a game in an industry which seems, at times, embarrassed to have fun, we're certainly not going to complain. Accusations of a lack of imagination seem groundless when you consider the fact that *Super Mario Galaxy* threw more surprises at the player over its duration than most franchises manage across their entire existence, and *Super Mario Galaxy 2* looks set to welcome its players back to a universe packed with joyous ideas.

Not that *SMG2* seems particularly concerned about its status as a follow-up to one of the best games ever made. The first level we played, Sky Station Galaxy, seems to be a tribute to the Good Egg Galaxy of the first game, culminating in a battle around a planetoid with a giant, angry piranha plant. Nonetheless, of the rest of the nine levels playable, roughly half showcased features unique to the sequel.

The first of these is the new drill power-up which, with a quick spin of the Remote, Mario can use to burrow into one side of a planetoid at high speed before emerging on the other. As a mechanic, it complements the twisting design and spatial reasoning demands of the *Galaxy* games' spheres in a way that none of the fun but ultimately throwaway power-ups in the first game (which, on reflection, were often limited to the traditional, flatly designed levels) could ever manage. In the Spin Dig Galaxy, the drill finds uses in both platforming and combat sections. At one point, Mario is tasked with calculating the precise point at which to penetrate the surface of a double-sided planetoid in order to emerge on top of an otherwise unscaleable column on the opposite side, and later is required to bore through a disc-shaped planet to attack a stomping robot with a star trapped beneath its undercarriage.

A more fundamental addition to the game is the triumphant return of Yoshi to the franchise. Available in half the levels we played (and with conspicuously empty nests dotted around at least one other), the little green dino brings his own distinct style of platforming to the game, and certainly seems to have a role more central than that of mere power-up. Not quite as acrobatically flamboyant as Mario (although his trademark flutter jump returns), he does, however, have a few tricks of his own. When riding the

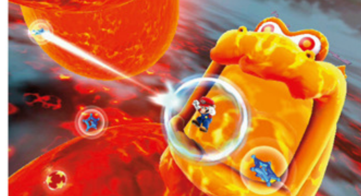




Supermassive Galaxy should bring back fond memories of *64*'s Tiny Huge Island. Yes, that is a giant question mark block, and no, we couldn't find a way to hit it

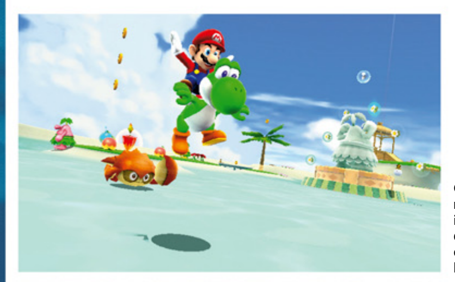
This unfortunate fellow has just had his own Bullet Bill spat back at him. Yoshi can also swallow regular enemies for star bits and unearth coins from clumps of dirt











Getting hit by an enemy while riding Yoshi will result in an inelegant dismount and a dinosaur potentially running off a platform's edge, just like in *Super Mario World*



If the sight of Yoshi and Mario performing a victory celebration together fails to raise a grin, we don't know what to suggest. *Galaxy 2* retains the first game's irrepressible charm

dinosaur, the star cursor onscreen changes to a red blob which, when moved over enemies and objects, turns into a red circle to signify that they're in range. At this point, all that's needed is a quick tap of 'B' and Yoshi will snaffle the target with his tongue. Like all the best uses of the Remote, it's so transparently natural that it's hard to imagine it working any other way, and it can be used to swallow incoming Bullet Bills before firing them back at your attackers or using them to destroy barriers blocking Mario's route, though other options naturally exist, too.

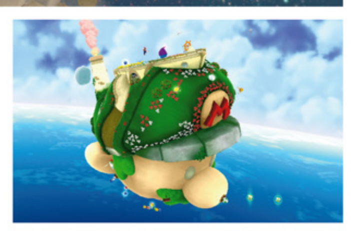
Is it a harder game than the original? Nintendo has certainly promised as much and, in places at least, the levels on offer appear to substantiate those claims. Checkpoints seem less generous, but are clearly marked this time around by flags which spin to reveal an 'M' symbol whenever Mario walks by. One boss in particular – a snorting, writhing dragon which burrows in and out of the planetoid Mario fights it on – is going to give everyone a spot of trouble, while one level contains a platform which, when activated, warps Mario to a timed combat challenge which can't be retried without a full level restart. Perhaps the most undeniably entertaining challenge, however, comes from a level which toys with the skills of those who completed the original game. A star in the Flip Swap Galaxy asks the player to collect 100 purple coins within a four-minute time limit – and takes place on a set of tiles which realign themselves with every spin attack Mario performs. Players who try to realise all but the most carefully planned of jumps with a shake of the Remote will find themselves hurtling towards oblivion time and time again, with only themselves and the instinctive reflexes the first game honed to blame.

It's a pretty cruel trick, but a neat one, and an indication that *Super Mario Galaxy 2* looks set to provide players with an experience which matches its predecessor for moments that make you stop, rethink the skills you've been using, and learn to use them all over again. More of the same, then. Anything else would be less.

One boss in particular – a snorting, writhing dragon which burrows in and out of the planetoid Mario fights him on – is going to give everyone a spot of trouble

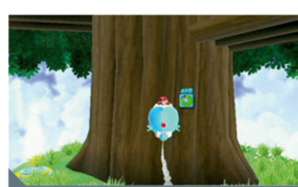
Bosses seem, if anything, to surpass the high standards set by the first game. A more characterful and amusing bunch of bulging, snorting, stamping horrors you'll rarely see







Is that a classic Mario world map? Our demo contained no hub world, but with the hub being one of the first *Galaxy*'s few disappointments, here's hoping we see some improvement in this area this time around



Five a day

Yoshi, naturally, comes with his own set of power-ups. A quick snack on a dash pepper will temporarily turn him into a bright red, furious steam train of a steed capable of climbing vertical inclines and negotiating almost rollercoaster track-like strips between platforms – one level requires players to do so while avoiding fiendishly placed bumpers on the track's corners. Meanwhile, swallow one of the blue berries dotted around certain galaxies and Yoshi will inflate like a balloon before expelling the air in order to scale heights unreachable by his jumps alone. One section, reminiscent of the bubble sections in the first game, saw us propelling the pair towards a star at the top of a vertical tunnel, avoiding the spiny obstacles en route.

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE/TEAM NINJA**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

Metroid: Other M

It's a man's world – but it revolves around a woman in an armoured suit

Perhaps in a bid to keep fans' thoughts rooted in his SNES glory days, it was Yoshio Sakamoto whose name thickened the air at our recent hands-on session with *Metroid: Other M*, but it's the presence of Team Ninja on the title screen that really raises questions.

Set shortly after the events of the last SNES instalment *Super Metroid* (the intro is a glamorous rehash of the 1994 game's outro), *Other M* finds Samus Aran newly self-employed as a planet-hopping bounty hunter, having slain Mother Brain and lived to voiceover about it.

'Cinematic action' is the marketing slogan of choice here – an allusion more to the strong artistic presence of regular *Dead Or Alive* cutscene freelancers D-Rockets rather than any profound genre-defining mechanic. Though that's not to say the gameplay hasn't been remixed. When the glossy intro steps aside for your tutorial in Samus' new/old duds, it's a beauty akin to your first taste of *New Super Mario Bros* to behold her in 2.5D. Navigating by D-pad (the Wii Remote is used mostly in its SNES-like position) is surprisingly responsive and offers plenty of scope for evasive manoeuvres. The slight delay in shifting to morph ball (the 'A' button has been assigned but isn't exactly momentum friendly) is a minor oversight, but it's easily compensated for by the whiteout of a room-blanketing bomb.

Any fears about a camera left in the hands of Team Ninja can also be allayed. The designers have played it safe with a range of fixed angles that direct but never overtly hand-hold, giving scope for the sort of exploration the series is known for. However, thirdperson excursions into claustrophobic living spaces, presumably designed for panning and scanning, do give some pause for doubt. The D-pad is suddenly rendered sluggish and confused as you wander around with Samus' shoulder pads blocking your vision – it's at this point that you begin to miss the Nunchuk. Its absence is a little hard to fathom as the old-school gimmick of a sideways Wii Remote wears off the moment you need that extra bit of room to breathe. A sign of the clash between the incompatible control methods required for 2D and 3D.

The overall visual style and iconography of *Metroid* has been carried over wholesale to *Other M*, so don't expect any shock-tactic redesigns. It's testament to the original art direction that those yellow and red armour plates still turn heads over 20 years on. Samus' animations and actions are present and correct, with a couple of fresh additions for good measure. Dodging attacks in slow motion, similar to a *Ninja Gaiden* counter-attack, is intuitive and simultaneously shines

> It's a clear bid to make a Metroid cocktail from the ghosts of games past, oddly place under the banner of Team Ninja, a studio unaccustomed to strong female characters

Go go, ensemble cast!

The introduction of key characters such as the gruff Anthony Higgs and more mysterious Adam Malkovich actually suits *Other M*'s new direction. If Team Ninja can bring a little more subtlety to its storytelling than form suggests, it may achieve a sense of human drama amid all the scavenging. The other Federation team members, however, appear to be in place just to make up the numbers, their participation in the boss-battle scenario we played mere scenery rather than anything resembling AI. More frighteningly, their get-ups and dialogue exchanges carry the faint but deadly whiff of an episode of Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers.





The amount of screen time given to the freshly unmasked Samus will be in contention and itself divide fans. The quality and flair of the CG production, however, is undeniably striking. The back-to-basics approach to Samus' first-level outfit maintains a look suitable for the historic timeline – will Team Ninja be able to resist the pink bikini?









The thirdperson-action background of the dev team shows itself in the finishing moves. Landing perfect mounts without an analogue stick is tricky, and cries out for a Nunchuk

a light on the solid new character model. Less comforting are the *God Of War*-style finishing moves that are out of place with a character not attuned to, or capable of, the gruesome finishers such a system uses for reward. At least there are no QTE prompts.

An auto lock-on for blasting your familiar foes needs calibrating before release or you'll regularly waste rounds on walls and backgrounds trying to engage enemies in the 2.5D corridors. Even less encouraging is the need to shift into firstperson by flicking the wrist and aiming at the screen – sound familiar? It's a clear bid to make a *Metroid* cocktail from the ghosts of games past, oddly placed under the banner of Team Ninja, a studio unaccustomed to strong female characters.

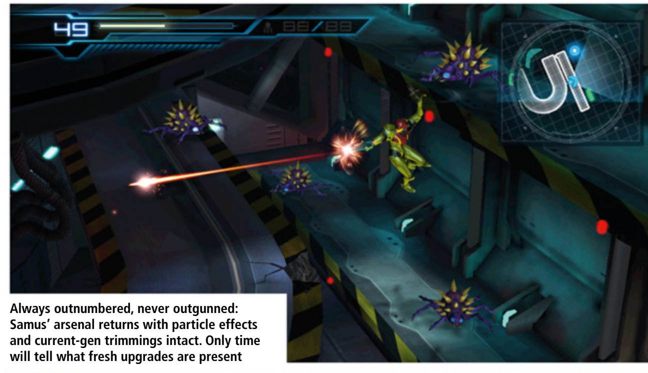
Samus herself plays a much larger role in what we've seen, unmasked within the opening scenes to reveal a picture-perfect bleach-blonde complete with beauty spot and squeezed into her favourite jumpsuit – one that's never looked so tight, shiny and impractical. Dedicated fans will cry sacrilege, but the presence of Samus' voice and backstory is something the team wastes no time in exploring, even if it wasn't made to an order from the audience. A defector from the Galactic Federation Army, her expositional descriptions cut in regularly, stealing some of the series' mystique in a bid to flesh out her mythology and sprinkle a little dramatic interest over proceedings. The presence of peripheral characters in the form of gung-ho marines may smack of narrative padding, but they do bring an element of friction to the leading lady's crusade that's rarely been explored, contrasting her against the oppressive masculinity of the Federation in command.



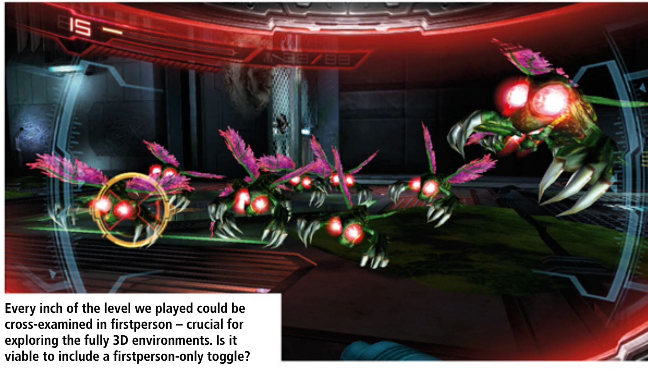
Charging along the corridors of Samus' new haunts brings with it clear memories of the original *Metroid* trilogy. Playing *Other M* with the Wii Remote held sideways does rapidly begin to grate, however, when gameplay traverses that tricky gap between the 2D and 3D realms

With US developer Retro Studios having realised three separate firstperson interpretations of *Metroid* it was ample time for a new direction, and Team Ninja can't be accused of having failed to shift gears. Nintendo has made a particular talent of choosing studios to deal with its core IP, and the match with this developer shows promise if not instant results. A problem is that some of this team's weaknesses, manifesting in bland environments and mediocre boss battles, would be particularly detrimental to Samus' health. The one minor boss we encountered was a stop-start affair that lacked any real sense of drama or scale. The enemy design itself, a writhing blob of pixel flesh ripe for the slashing, could have been cut and pasted from *Ninja Gaiden*.

Concerns that the prestigious series would be given the Tecmo treatment in the form of an overt sexualisation and eccentric approach to character aren't a major worry right now. The concern instead is that this franchise, having conquered both two- and three-dimensional gamespaces with such confidence and finesse, might have found itself – like its storyline – stuck somewhere in the middle.



Always outnumbered, never outgunned: Samus' arsenal returns with particle effects and current-gen trimmings intact. Only time will tell what fresh upgrades are present



Every inch of the level we played could be cross-examined in firstperson – crucial for exploring the fully 3D environments. Is it viable to include a firstperson-only toggle?

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **REMEDY**
ORIGIN: **FINLAND**
RELEASE: **MAY 18 (US), MAY 21 (UK)**

Alan Wake

Finally, Remedy's long-awaited horror thriller steps into the light and a controller lands in our hands



Players can take or leave the storytelling; much of it is hidden away as incidental details of the environment, and radios and TVs fill you in on current events. We stood listening to the night DJ of the local radio station attempt to calm down a local caller after the unexplained disappearance of his dog





One mystery in particular fuelled the early excitement about *Alan Wake*: how would Remedy weave a horror story into an open world? But every mystery has a twist, and Remedy upturned expectations by quickly abandoning this idea and instead creating a linear, cinematic action-horror game. As far as twists go, however, this is one which shouldn't leave gamers groaning: the result is a tightly paced thriller combining the unseemly provincial weirdness of Twin Peaks with the grim tension of *Silent Hill* and the exhilarating thirdperson crowd-control combat of *Resident Evil 4*. Remedy insists that it doesn't look at other games for inspiration, but it's a claim that seems implausible given the eclectic mix of mechanisms on display in the nightmarish landscape of Bright Falls.

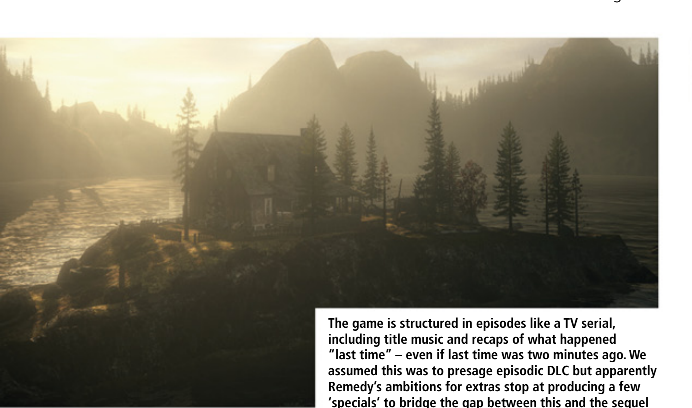
Of no little prominence among these inspirations are Remedy's previous *Max Payne* games – *Alan Wake* builds on their filmic eye for action, and once again casts the player in a role whose thoughts and actions are described by a distinctive narrator. The new game, however, exchanges Payne's hard-boiled cop cliché for the tropes and tricks of horror fiction: Wake's a famous writer, albeit one struggling to put pen to paper since his last book, and his regular voiceover interjections are in the past tense, couched in the shlocky terms of his chosen genre.

Judging by the opening hour or so, Wake also share's Payne's demeanour – but this time the sourness results from a more nuanced sense of personal failure rather than simple vengeance. Being plagued by prophetic nightmares (the first helpfully containing a tutorial on how to duck sweeping axe blows aimed in your direction by undead hitchhikers) and unable to write, Wake has taken his wife on a vacation to the remote Pacific Northwest. And during daylight hours, at least, Bright Falls seems like a pleasant enough place to recuperate, nestled in a bay overlooked by dramatic crags and pine forests – the legacy of Remedy's open-world engine experiments.

Though there's no dynamic day-night cycle as originally proposed, daylight sequences interpose suspenseful respite from the horrific action of night, and Wake is able to wander about talking to the locals. The dialogue is wry but economical – a starstruck waitress in a diner gushes about Wake's last book, to his irritation, while two old coots in the corner argue over which record should go on the jukebox. As Wake starts off down the corridor to the bathroom, he's warned that the lights are out by a demented biddy clutching a lamp: "You can hurt yourself in the dark!"

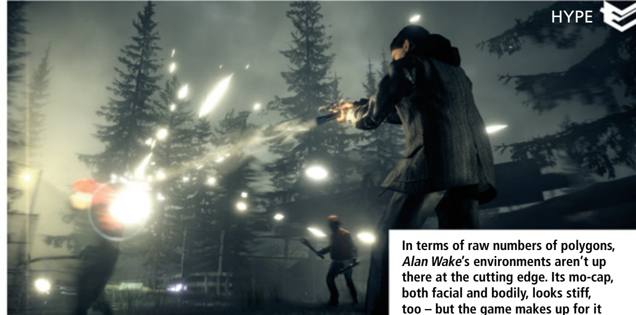
Unsurprisingly, this quickly turns out

Alan Wake builds on the Max Payne games' eye for action, and once again casts the player in a role whose thoughts and actions are described by a distinctive narrator



The game is structured in episodes like a TV serial, including title music and recaps of what happened "last time" – even if last time was two minutes ago. We assumed this was to presage episodic DLC but apparently Remedy's ambitions for extras stop at producing a few 'specials' to bridge the gap between this and the sequel

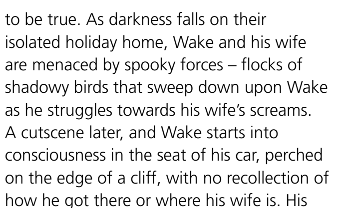




In terms of raw numbers of polygons, *Alan Wake*'s environments aren't up there at the cutting edge. Its mo-cap, both facial and bodily, looks stiff, too – but the game makes up for it elsewhere in its art direction and lighting effects, wielding shadows and blinding beams of light to great effect

Like a TV series, Remedy says, it's important to have a strong supporting cast, meaning that you aren't totally (cough) alone in the dark. Wake finds allies in his visiting literary agent and the local sheriff





The voice-acting and motion-capture come together in a way which feels a little awkward given recent competing endeavours, but the script itself is serviceable enough. It's perhaps a little less parodic than *Max Payne*'s, too; the horror shtick doesn't quite veer into Garth Marenghi

to be true. As darkness falls on their isolated holiday home, Wake and his wife are menaced by spooky forces – flocks of shadowy birds that sweep down upon Wake as he struggles towards his wife's screams. A cutscene later, and Wake starts into consciousness in the seat of his car, perched on the edge of a cliff, with no recollection of how he got there or where his wife is. His phone is broken, and he determines to make his way through the moonlit woodland to the distant lights of a petrol station.

Remedy's technology has not gone to waste in drawing large vistas, even if not all of it is navigable. While the route is linear, the environments periodically expand into more open arenas, and the sprawl of a logging operation offers some modicum of exploration in among the outcrops and cliffs. Although instinct tells you to press on, it's worth poking around – there are pages here from a novel manuscript Wake doesn't remember writing but which appear to be coming true. More than simple collectibles, these can occasionally give you a useful heads-up and expand on Wake's verbalised observations.

Then there's ammunition and the conspicuously branded batteries for your torch – you'll need to conserve both. As Wake heads towards the petrol station it's clear he's not alone: flickering shadowy figures which the manuscript refers to as 'the Taken' lurch at him, brandishing axes and sickles. As in *Resident Evil 4*, it only takes a couple of swipes for Wake to die, and the Taken are more cunning in flanking you than Capcom's pseudo-zombies, immediately fanning out as you draw your weapon.

Wake can stun the Taken with a swish of his flashlight, and concentrating the torch beam on one burns away the protective shadows to reveal an ordinary-looking woodsman who can then be blasted with whatever ammunition you have. This process involves a tense bit of micromanagement: focusing your beam saps battery power at a rapid rate (making this a rather self-effacing piece of product placement for Energizer) and though it recharges slowly, any battle with two or more Taken sees the torchlight flicker. Do you back off, recharge and reserve your limited supply of batteries, or discard and replace at the risk of running out altogether? This, in addition to the usual worries of keeping the chambers of your revolver full, pushes fraught battles further towards the edge of your control.

The interplay between light and dark may not be new to games, but its deployment here is neatly realised. Pools of light heal you, spotlights are Wake's equivalent of the machine-gun turret, and flare guns become rocket launchers. The dark presence, meanwhile, possesses wildlife and people, and even sends inanimate objects hurtling towards you – your uncertainty of its capabilities or, indeed, the reality of what you are experiencing, allows Remedy to keep surprising you. This may not be the grandiose project it once purported to be, having scaled down its ambitions for dynamism and freedom, but if Remedy's designs for its night-terror have become more deftly orchestrated as a result, then its open world is one mystery we don't mind being dispelled.



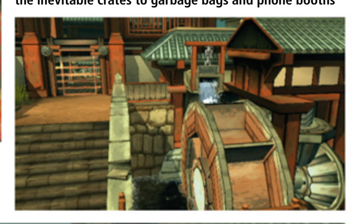
Flare for cinema

***Max Payne*'s slow-mo dives may be a thing of the past, but Remedy still knows how to manipulate time for dramatic effect. The camera periodically unhinges from its position behind Wake's shoulder and swings out to look at points of interest. Rather than irritating, Remedy has managed to make this slick and useful – pivoting to point out an enemy's approach, slowing to give you an extra moment to react. Even when the camera indulged itself to pursue a flare as it arced into a group of Taken during our demo, never once did it obscure other important action.**





New abilities and upgrades can be purchased from each stage's central hub. Currency is harvested from smashing almost anything littered around the environments, from the inevitable crates to garbage bags and phone booths



It's a violent world you're asked to explore, but despite some gruesome finishers the game shies away from displaying gore. The liberal use of red flashes to indicate damage, however, means you'll barely notice its absence



Bigger enemies require you to duck and weave rather than throw everything you have at them. Dodging around the bad guys is a simple matter of pressing the B button and flicking the thumbstick in the appropriate direction

Red Steel 2

A game that isn't so much genre defining as it is genre defying

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **MARCH 26**



Cracking stuff

Like all the best Wii games, *Red Steel 2* doesn't avoid minigames but makes a virtue of them. Enjoyable coin hunts keep you alert to your surroundings and unlock bonuses, but it's the safe-cracking asides that really shine. Holding the Remote to your ear and rotating it, the trick is to listen out for clicks to unlock the booty inside. It's fun, adds variety and it's certainly a lot more fun than smashing crates.

Ubisoft has hacked away at the concept behind *Red Steel*, even going so far as to strip away its Yakuza trappings. The resulting sequel is leaner, meaner and more convincing, but bears very little comparison to the original.

The first thing that strikes you is the new setting. A Grindhouse gonzo western, it owes more to Tarantino than the hardboiled Japanese cinema that informed the original. The lead character, an apparently nameless warrior, is more classic Clint than Takeshi Kitano. It's a stylistic shift that works in the game's favour. Ditto the stylish cel-shaded look that recalls the developer's earlier FPS, *XIII*. But these cosmetic tweaks are among the least significant alterations.

Ironically, it's the most familiar aspects of the game that yield the biggest changes. The game's dual gun and blade combat is carried over but the results are very different and far superior. It's the sword that does most of the heavy lifting – so much for the old saying about taking a knife to a gunfight. Not only is it used to chip away the armour of the game's more resilient enemies, it also doubles as a portable cover system.

As a result, any claim the game may have laid to being a firstperson shooter is lost. The ability to dance around enemies, repelling bullets, merrily hacking and blasting away transforms it into a *Devil May Cry* clone played out in firstperson. Odd, yes – but it seems to work.

Despite all of the fanfare surrounding Wii's MotionPlus it's actually astute design work and the humble original Remote that make the game work. Yes, the add-on device (likely to be bundled with the game) allows for greater accuracy, but it's the console's out-of-the-box ability to replace visual feedback with physical input that carries the day. Indeed, it's hard to imagine any other system managing such a game with equal success – at least, as Ubisoft itself has pointed out, until Sony's motion controller makes its appearance.

Structurally, things have developed too. It owes more to the *Metroid Prime* series than the hack'n'slash titles its combat emulates. Levels are structured around hub areas, gradually unravelling around multi-tiered, criss-crossing arenas. Each new mission evolves your surroundings slightly, adding a brace of outlaws here, opening a door there and tossing destructible wagons over yonder.

It remains to be seen whether *Red Steel 2* can carry the player through without running out of ideas. Without greater evolution than the unlockable specials so far glimpsed, the game could leave players elated but feeling a little empty. But at present it's a title that defies the restrictions of its genre and leaves the original choking on its dust.



Unlockable combos add variety and a sense of the absurd. It's hard to imagine such *DMC*/*GOW*-style athletics being communicated in firstperson on any other console. The world feels seamless





The Circuit de Catalunya (below), with its long straights and nasty tight turns, has seen six Schumacher victories since its debut in 1991, so players should look out for him here if they want to win the championship



F1 2010

Codemasters addresses the top concern for a racer: direction

Whatever's said about rosters and liveries, absolute, up-to-the-minute realism isn't always the best kind for a sports sim, especially when it's the reality of Formula 1. Marred by scandal, politics, unsustainable costs and an encroaching technophobia from casual viewers, the sport has suffered a gradual, decade-long slump. Unfortunate enough to be licence holder at the time, Sony managed a fine job of simulating it, the most recent PS3 game evoking little but nostalgia for older, more optimistic ones by Bizarre Creations and Geoff Crammond.

But in case you hadn't heard, things are looking up again. Michael Schumacher is back, this time without a dominant Ferrari stealing half the limelight. Engines are (slowly and painfully) going green; races are moving to new and exciting corners of the globe; cars by Brawn GP and Red Bull are making everyone rethink their strategies; and a marriage of safety and spectacle concerns are restoring the importance of driver skill.



Aware of the potentially arduous nature of F1 races, *F1 2010* promises wide-ranging options for length, handling, AI and multiplayer. The recently introduced knockout format of qualifying helps, and is joined by micro-races of just a few laps

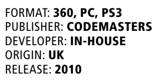
"We've got to do more than just launch with accurate tracks, teams, licences and so forth," explains chief designer **Stephen Hood**. "If you watch some of the races now, they're particularly exciting – qualifying's quite cool now with its knockout tournament stuff – and I don't think previous games have made enough of this. So while we are going down the authentic route, we have to go beyond that to make racing more fun."

F1 2010 will avoid what Hood calls the "*PaRappa The Rapper* moments" in Sony's last F1 game, specifically pitstops that use cutaway cams and button taps to make things more 'involving'. There's enough drama elsewhere



Taking its cue from another successful Codemasters reboot, *Race Driver: Grid*, *F1 2010* has a motto: "Live the life". This means more than just a career calendar, the game's frontend – as showy as you'd expect of its Racing Studio co-developers – focuses on everything other than the car and track, passing reporters, paparazzi and promo girls, as it moves between garage, press conference and personal trailer. We quite fancy a game of Magnetic Fields' Amiga hit *Supercars* right now, but apparently we don't need one: conversation trees make you an off-track politician, your choice of words affecting rivalries and opportunities.

Codemasters has become something of a provocateur in its racers, devoting much time to trash-talk and duels. Nowhere is this cattier and more expensive than in F1, and races in *F1 2010* duly take the tact out of tactics, opposing drivers doing everything you'd expect to hold and improve their positions, not always to their teammates' advantage. It's almost enough to make Schumacher smile.



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2010**



Egomania

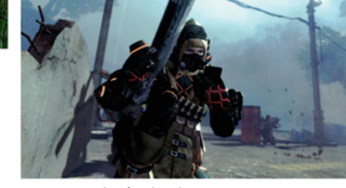
Casual F1 fans will look to Ego engine visuals to lure them back, and while the game is more reserved than *Grid* or *Dirt 2*, it has an ace up its sleeve: weather. Competing with little beyond Xbox 360 exclusive *Project Gotham Racing 4*, *F1 2010* should have the most complete and attractive dynamic weather system in racing, much of it already shining in this pre-alpha build. The sky is still a work-in-progress but rain has a dramatic effect on tyres and track, both visibly drying as conditions clear. We haven't seen Abu Dhabi yet, but the showpiece is Monaco, which makes photorealism look easy on PC. No word yet on DX11 support, which in *Dirt 2* adds a vital finishing touch.







Vital Suits are used sparingly, but the ability to fit them with heavy weapons makes them invaluable in your fight with the Akrid. The floppy-haired protagonists of the first game have been replaced with anonymous men of action



Lost Planet 2

East meets west in Capcom's co-op-heavy shooter sequel

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MAY**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E203, E204, E208**

Why can't we make games that people from other countries will enjoy?" asked Capcom's **Jun Takeuchi** in February 2009. The question was rhetorical but prophetic. Mere months later *Resident Evil 5* received a muted welcome in the west and was later eclipsed by the likes of *Uncharted 2* and *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. With the unveiling of the first half of the campaign mode of *Lost Planet 2*, on which Takeuchi serves as producer, he may want to retract his earlier comments.

The long-gestating sequel to 2006's ice-bound shooter retains the hallmarks of Japanese design but owes much more to western games, particularly multiplayer shooters. So while it retains the earlier game's immense Akrid antagonists and mech-like Vital Suits it mixes in plenty that will be familiar to online warriors.

After a mercifully brief handful of introductory stages we're plunged headlong into a vast jungle environment recalling *Uncharted 2* in its lushness, density and scale. Several painful respawns later and it becomes apparent that these aren't typical thirdperson shooter environments; they're multiplayer maps with entrances and exits.

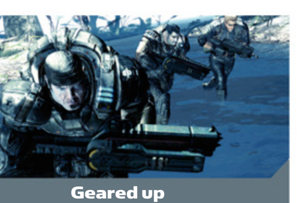
An early example places mission objectives (manually operated drilling nodes) largely in plain sight and pours enemies in from all sides. The trick isn't wiping out the enemies and triggering the devices, it's triggering the devices and keeping them running while under fire.

As the game's minimal and less-personal-than-before plot evolves, your role, faction and face change several times, but always there's an emphasis on co-operation. Even playing solo, Capcom is at pains to remind you that you really should be playing with three friends, even if it means attempting to fool you into thinking that you already are.

As a result, various graphical flourishes are applied to campaign mode to maintain the feel of a multiplayer session. Onscreen rewards for kill streaks mingle with fictional Gamertags above our squadmates' heads. It's a sleight of hand that largely pays off.

Playing online looks identical, but as ever human ingenuity trumps AI when the pressure's on. The result is a canny combination of sharp shooting and sharp wit, the team splitting in two to rout the enemy, forming up behind a large portable shield and dispensing vital thermal energy to lagging players. At its best it recalls a looser, less intimate but more ingenious *Left 4 Dead*.

And the payoff? Our online team is a mix of Americans and Europeans. Every one of them as western as the game they're playing clearly wants to be.



Geared up

The inclusion of the *Gears Of War* series' heroes, Marcus and Dom, reflects the game's more rugged design and nods to one of its chief influences: western shooters. *Lost Planet 2* may lack the Epic games' tight cover system, but it retains its high-fiving sense of co-operation. They're a far cry from the original game's hero, Wayne, but their very western design leaves the less surprising inclusion of *Resident Evil*'s Albert Wesker feeling like the more incongruous cameo.



Cutscenes are brief and to the point, contrasting against the stilted exposition of the *Resident Evil* series and the outrageous showboating of the *Devil May Cry* games

Larger Akrid can expose the game's loose approach to combat. When the arena is too small there's no place to hide from the lack of cover and occasionally inadequate manoeuvrability. Your only option is to batter the nearest bugs into submission and hope someone's watching your back


THE JAPANESE SMASH HIT
COMES TO EUROPE...
PS3
PlayStation Network
YAKUZA 3
18
SEGA
The million-selling Yakuza franchise comes to Europe and the PlayStation®3.
Take on the Yakuza in the role of Kazuma as he battles to escape from his sordid past.
18
PS3
PlayStation Network
12 - 3 - 10
WWW.SEGA.CO.UK/GAMES/YAKUZA3
SEGA®
www.sega.co.uk

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010**

Armored Core 5

From Software goes back to its old stomping ground: hulking robot suits

With *Armored Core 4*, From Software aimed to use the power of the new generation of consoles to give a full MOT to its mech combat series, introducing new, highly detailed models capable of speeds previously unseen in the franchise. Unfortunately, that title fell some way short of the developer's ambition. Now, with a greater knowledge of the current generation of hardware, the team behind *Armored Core 5* has been better able to realise that earlier vision. You will believe a robot can fly at Mach 5. Nonetheless, From Software has acknowledged that the franchise has been pushed as far it can reasonably go on the basis of speed alone, and is looking to inject a few fresh ideas into the series.

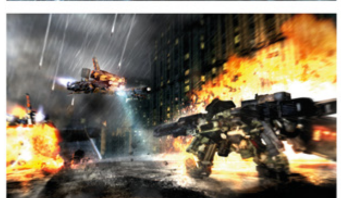
New additions include special moves that can be performed during high-velocity moments, lending a greater sense of dynamism to the combat. The mech models themselves, which will be sporting a more militaristic design this time around, have been scaled down, and will take up roughly half the amount of screen space as they did before. The aim is to allow you to focus on negotiating the game's environments, which are the largest and most detailed yet seen in the franchise. Mission design has also been overhauled, and will often include multiple objectives which will evolve and change over the course of a level.



As well as simply being larger, *AC5*'s arenas will offer greater levels of detail as well as increased verticality. A more tactically rich and diverse experience should result







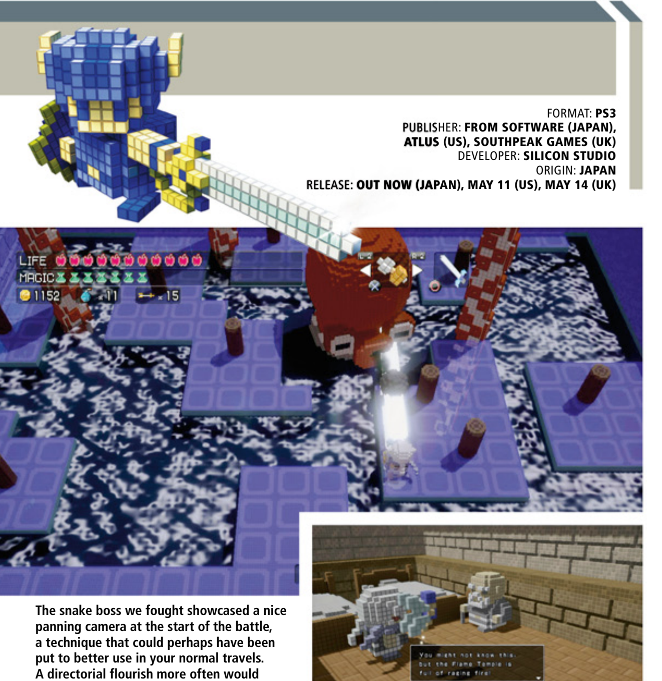
***Armored Core 5* will showcase the mechs' destructive capabilities, with a new 'Over Weapon' system offering players the chance for one-hit kills on their opponents. Dramatic last-ditch comebacks should be a possibility**

Multiplayer is confirmed, with more than just a standard versus mode promised. From Software states that from this point onwards online integration is going to be a core feature of the franchise. A minor example of this will be seen by those who purchase the upcoming *Last Raven Portable* on PSP, which will contain a code allowing owners of *AC5* to download extra content for the console title.

3D Dot Game Heroes

A familiar tale, and one presented in an old-fashioned way – albeit with an entirely contemporary spin

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **FROM SOFTWARE (JAPAN), ATLUS (US), SOUTHPEAK GAMES (UK)**
DEVELOPER: **SILICON STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), MAY 11 (US), MAY 14 (UK)**



The snake boss we fought showcased a nice panning camera at the start of the battle, a technique that could perhaps have been put to better use in your normal travels. A directorial flourish more often would better showcase the chunky style – the game does, after all, sell itself as 3D

3D Dot Game Heroes poses a big question, and the one most worth asking, about pixel-art stylings. Just how robust are these designs when stripped of the nostalgia?

Drawing on the past for both visual approach and mechanics, it ruthlessly apes *Zelda*. Link's top-down adventures rightly inspire devotion and loyalty, fully deserving their place in gaming's hall of fame, and *3DDGH* adopts a faux-naif style of polygonal building blocks to recreate their atmosphere. It's close enough to warrant a cease-and-desist order from Kyoto, but certainly works: the shiny bricks construct a robust approximation, and nice touches like defeated enemies scattering into their constituents add a touch of original identity.

As for what you're doing, the structure and mechanics are so familiar that they almost need no explanation. There's an overworld spotted with dungeons, each dungeon containing an item and a mystical trinket needed for progress, as well as various towns and side-quests to explore. The dungeon we've explored featured as its key item – wait for it – a boomerang. Not a hanging offence in its own right, but the location and boss fight doesn't exactly showcase unfamiliar applications of it.



When your health is full, your sword grows to almost fill the screen. Switching directions rapidly makes it swing to the way you're facing, and hit every enemy in between

Still, playing through is a familiar and easy experience, like snuggling up with an old blanket, and *3DDGH* is just arch enough in its scripting and visual references for the odd wry smile. This isn't groundbreaking stuff, and the forbiddingly great alternative is *A Link To The Past* on Virtual Console, but if you're housebound with a nasty cold for a few days it may be close enough to virtual chicken soup.



Two Worlds II

Reality Pump attempts to beat Bethesda at its own game

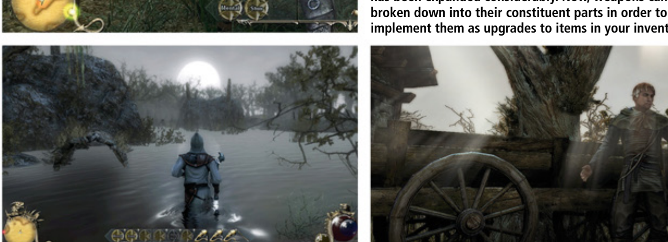
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TOPWARE INTERACTIVE (EUROPE), SOUTHPEAK GAMES (US, UK)**
DEVELOPER: **REALITY PUMP**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **Q3 2010**

As the sequel to a game compared – unfavourably – to *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, it's either bold or incredibly uninspired that *Two Worlds II* opens with a dramatic escape from your character's dungeon prison.

Still, there are signs that Reality Pump learned some lessons from the development of the original *Two Worlds*, which was conceived as a PC-only title and experienced a difficult port to Xbox 360. The console versions of *Two Worlds II*, by contrast, have been built from the ground up, with a more accessible control scheme and the studio's new GRACE engine aimed towards ensuring a smoother experience on all formats.

Also improved is the magic system, expanded from the original game. Basic spell cards can be laid alongside modifier cards to create complex and unusual effects. In the example we're shown, a fireball card, combined with bounce and multiplier modifiers, creates a hail of fire that ricochets throughout the environment. Were an undead card added, corpses would rise from the ground where the fireballs make contact.

The weapon 'stacking' system from the original game has been expanded considerably. Now, weapons can be broken down into their constituent parts in order to implement them as upgrades to items in your inventory



Marshy swamps, sandy beaches and cities drawing on a range of cultural influences are all on show. You'll only be able to go horse riding in the specifically designed savannah, though



Multiplayer includes PvP and co-op modes as well as the more interesting sounding 'village mode' which, we're told, tasks the player with building and maintaining a settlement. When their village is attacked, players will need to call on their online friends (who can stay as guests in each other's townships) to mount a successful defence. However, the loot you gain from maintaining your town and trading with friends is limited to multiplayer modes only, which, due to balancing reasons, remain separate from the singleplayer experience.

The original *Two Worlds*' major undoing were the twin evils of its hammily acted, po-faced fantasy setting and its unimaginative quest design. With placeholder audio still in place and no complete quests on show, it remains to be seen if the sequel is worlds apart.

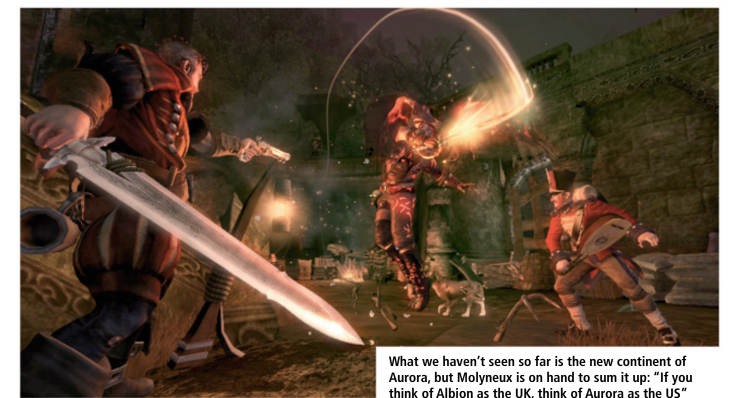
Fable III

Health bars and HUDs are out, crowns and customisation are in

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q4 2010**

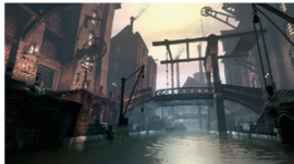
You've got to love him: **Peter Molyneux** says he knows what you expect of *Fable III*. The third in a successful series should follow a familiar path, right? Not so fast. PT Barnum mode is swinging into full effect, and its first salvo is that *Fable III* will disappoint some fans. Well, the storyline leaps forward, thrusting the fantasy setting through an industrial revolution that injects Victorian aesthetics into Albion's fields and towns, but there's more than cosmetic change here. *Fable III* is jettisoning the core RPG mechanics that gave shape to its predecessors.

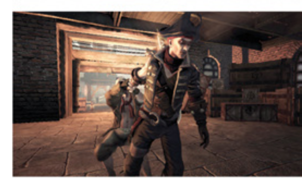
Health bar? Ditched. Levelling up? Hidden. Gone are the 2D screens that enabled you to manage specific details, replaced by a more dynamic approach that evolves your character and items depending on how you act and what you use. Molyneux outlines what Lionhead considers a more dynamic approach to typical RPG feedback: "Why don't we do what the firstperson shooter has done so well and use the environment as a health bar?" Combat, as a result, is even more action-oriented than in *Fable II*, but still incorporates the diligence of a 'traditional' RPG in your weapon use, which dictates how what's in your hand evolves and levels up (the weapon's size is shaped by the number of kills it has racked up, for instance, and cosmetic elements such as unique spikes are determined by your actual Xbox 360 Gamerscore).



What we haven't seen so far is the new continent of Aurora, but Molyneux is on hand to sum it up: "If you think of Albion as the UK, think of Aurora as the US"

What's in your other hand, however, could be even more fascinating. A new 'touch' mechanic introduces a tactile relationship with each person you meet. Whether it's hugging your daughter, holding hands with a hooker or dragging a beggar to work in a factory, the theory is that it adds an emotional level to your interactions with virtual characters. While it's hard to judge in a scripted demo, it's a mechanic with huge potential for mischief and pathos – which should be right up Lionhead's alley. Apart from these game elements, there is Molyneux's excitement in promising us the world, a feeling this won't be quite as radical as he claims, and an equal conviction that it'll still be great. Business as usual, then, masked as anything but.



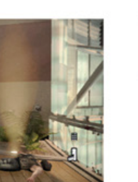


The introduction of the touch mechanic is intended to bring about new levels of interaction between player and NPCs

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **VOLATILE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **APRIL 16**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E209**

Dead To Rights: Retribution

One man, his dog, and a city full of criminal scum begging to be rubbed out as slickly as possible









The first full level doesn't so much rip off the original Die Hard as much as take it hostage in a skyscraper

Jack Slate makes Marcus Fenix look rather wimpy. Out-bulking the Gears without an overcompensating suit of armour, he understands that while it's sometimes necessary to bring a gun to a fist fight, there are times when a right hook will do the job just as well.



The locations could be a little more inspired, but their realisation is not without flair. A combination of lighting, weather effects and a hyper-real art style lend a heavy hint of noir to proceedings

It's these close-combat mechanics that best distinguish *Retribution* from other cover-based shooters. Slate's range of combos, counters, takedowns and grapples brings breadth and complexity to an area in which the genre can often find itself lacking, and a measured ammo supply coupled with aggressive enemy AI will often force the player to go hand-to-hand. Or, at least, it will until the moment the player disarms and shoots one thug in a single fluid motion, grapples another, takes him hostage and sends all the other enemies fleeing for cover.

A less immediately tangible but equally welcome addition to combat is the role of Slate's dog Shadow, which provides limited crowd control during the busier scraps, and takes centre stage in its own sections. In these segments, depressing the left trigger activates an enemy-detecting stealth mode that has more in common with *Arkham Asylum*'s visor than any canine sense. And, indeed, these sections play out like a simplified version of the stealth in Rocksteady's game, requiring the player to pick off isolated enemies with one-button takedown manoeuvres which, in some instances, look leg-crossingly painful.

Despite bringing some fresh touches to an increasingly over-exposed genre, it remains to be seen whether Volatile's level design can sustain interest for the length of the game. Opening levels involve an upward slog through an office building, followed by a prettier, but equally familiar, run-down industrial estate. Slate's definitely got the skills, but he could do with somewhere a bit more interesting to walk the dog.

Super Street Fighter IV

Putting a trio of new warriors through their paces (and listening to what they've got to say about it)

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **APRIL 30 (360, PS3), TBC (PC)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E209**

The ten new characters in *Super Street Fighter IV* include Guy (above, versus Rose), Adon (below left, versus Sagat), and Cody (below, versus Chun-Li)

Standing over Guy's prone figure, a little self-congratulatory but looking hale, hearty and ready to hand out another beating, Dudley says: "There's no need to block against the likes of you." Cody, wandering off after a nearly flawless victory, shouts: "You suuuck, man." Trash-talking is the soundtrack to **Edge**'s game room, and we're barely saying a word.

Super Street Fighter IV's many additions include ten new fighters, a team battle mode, a replay channel, an endless battle (against other human players), a tournament mode, the bonus stages that should have been here the first time around, costumes, ultra combos, and a raft of tweaks that apparently further balance the game – though few would argue that *SFIV* needed much attention in this department. The latest build we've played features three *Street Fighter III* characters – Dudley, Ibuki and Makoto – as well as the other new faces, so we concentrated on putting them through the wringer.

Makoto's an odd one. Your execution skills have to be top-notch, as she's a pressure player who's weak on defence and doesn't have a huge amount of health. But begin chaining attacks from her dashing punch (Hayate), mixing in her grab and choke move (Karakusa) and she's impossible to get off, forcing opponents to the corner as you unleash barrage after barrage. We found her a little easier to get to grips with than Ibuki, who theoretically has a similar style of play: an equally small health bar, and a dependence on flurries of combinations and counters to seriously damage enemies.

Then there's Dudley – disappointingly cockney rather than cocky this time around, but still possessed of a fine rose and damning quip. Less powerful than he looks, he's still a killer, with perhaps the fastest combos in the game. The action becomes a storm of fists, and when you begin punctuating those flurries with the hammer blow of EX specials, everything begins to run smoothly. "Keep it classy," he deadpans while smacking the taste out of Sakura's mouth. It's a perfect encapsulation of the *Street Fighter* spirit, and makes the wait for the finished game even more difficult.



Monster Hunter Frontier

Monster Hunter Tri may have some front, but this is Frontier, the Japanese series' MMOG



FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT/CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2010**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E175**

With a base of 1.5 million installed users in Japan and beta testing in Korea at an advanced stage, it appears that Capcom is setting up its previously PC-exclusive *Monster Hunter* MMOG to trap adventurers from farther afield. At least, that's our reading of it. Although a western release has yet to be formally announced, let's just say that there are niche products and then there are Xbox 360 MMOGs that are only released in Japan.

Capcom's Keiji Inafune has indicated that there's every intention to ensure that PC and Xbox 360 users will be able to play, hunt and share together. However, this feature won't be present when the closed beta begins in May, which will likely leave the 360 iteration with an uphill battle to match the PC's installed base. Surely few existing players will swap their invested time and friend rosters for the comfort of the sofa.

Salvation may come from an unlikely ally: the pay-to-play pricing structure. Microsoft Japan – which, as part of the deal, has agreed to host *Monster Hunter Frontier*'s servers – has priced its Hunter Life Course Coupons (giving 30 days of access) at ¥1,400 (£10), with Xbox Silver users gaining a free 30-day upgrade to the Gold service. It is, of course, more expensive than taking out a 12-month subscription, but Microsoft is clearly banking on the two-for-one deal being tempting enough to kickstart the online uptake of its Japanese userbase.

Frontier's chances of international travel will depend on *Tri*'s reception this spring. It's highly unlikely that Microsoft will be eager to take on the financial burden of server hosting in any territory where *Tri* flops.



Frontier follows the same basic format as its predecessors. Players don't level up through stats, but by making improvements to their arsenal. The money required for this is earned by taking quests from the NPCs, who loiter around the hub world. Each quest has a time limit, but there's often enough time to deviate for extracurricular activities



Monster Hunter Tri

Capcom wheels out its hunting nets on a new format, hoping to cast them farther than ever before

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **APRIL 30**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E196, E207, E208**

Monster Hunter's failure to attain commercial success outside of Japan has never been a thematic issue – stabbing a dinosaur in the neck with a nine-foot-long blade is the equivalent of gaming Esperanto. Rather, for a series that's in its element when its players hunt in packs, the problem has always concerned cultural appropriacy and logistics. Although Japanese gamers are only too happy to congregate in public places with their PSPs, ours is a more insular pastime in the west, thanks to the rise of online and lingering societal preconceptions. Mindful that European gamers would rather be sociable with their curtains drawn, Capcom and Nintendo have revamped *Tri*'s online components ahead of its western release, and the resulting game is something of a trailblazer for Wii's under-exploited online service.

Although Wii Speak support is a critical addition, it's what's been taken away that stands out. The abolition of Friend Codes, a first for the console, will make it much easier for its players to form random parties in the central online hub of Loc Lac, although there's still the convenience of a friend roster. Perhaps showing its PS3 roots, *Monster Hunter Tri* is best played with the Classic Controller. Fortunately, a Classic Pro will be packaged with the game, plus a Wii Speak peripheral and a soundtrack CD.

What hasn't been confirmed is whether European gamers will have to pay to play, as in the Japanese model. Talks are ongoing, we are told, although *Tri*'s chances of success in a market where it has yet to stamp any authority must surely hinge on the absence of any further entry barriers.

Early impressions indicate that *Monster Hunter Tri* has the necessary tools to expand the series' horizons. Although it still doggedly clings to the quirks that define the series (think laborious attack animations and difficulty spikes), it innovates in fascinating ways, pioneering an ecology system that sees the monsters interacting with (and feasting upon) each other. There are also underwater battles, which introduce a new dimension to the fray. It all now depends on the outcome of those talks. We wait with bated breath and baited traps.



The European release will see several new exclusive weapons, all designed by the fanbase. The most striking is the Sinster Saints switchaxe, capable of transforming between an axe and a sword, taking the form of the grim reaper and a goddess respectively

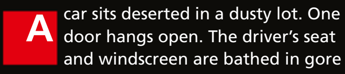




OPEN WORLD CONFIDENTIAL

We blow the case wide open on Rockstar's off the record, on the QT, and very hush-hush sandbox crime drama

TITLE: **LA NOIRE**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM BONDI**
ORIGIN: **AUSTRALIA**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**



A car sits deserted in a dusty lot. One door hangs open. The driver's seat and windscreen are bathed in gore – certainly way more blood than anyone could safely lose. A pipe lies nearby in the dirt, and elsewhere a pair of broken spectacles. A receipt in the car's trunk begs the question: who's A Hogan, and why did he pick up a live pig yesterday?

Deduction is the core of *LA Noire*, an open-world detective game steeped in the fiction of Dashiell Hammett and James Ellroy, informed by the police records, newspapers and maps of '40s Los Angeles. Evidence is gathered and examined, witnesses interrogated, suspects shaken down. Though published by Rockstar and taking place in an open city (a near street-for-street recreation of LA circa 1947), those expecting *GTA* to turn up in a fedora have been following a bad lead. As Cole Phelps, a cop working his way up through the LAPD, you'll spend considerably more time thinking about the case before you, and the constellation of facts that comprises it, than you will mowing down bad guys. The distinction is most obviously drawn by the fact that you are now on the other side of the law, but more profoundly because *LA Noire* follows a different rhythm to open-world action titles like *GTA*, a meditative pace in which detection rather than destruction is the propellent. There may be bodies aplenty, but most of the cadavers in question have cooled well before you encounter them, framed by chalk outlines.

Back at the parking lot, with its bloody abandoned car and missing pig, there is a distinct lack of chalk outlines. The absence of an actual body means the case falls to Phelps, currently working the traffic desk. As the game progresses, Phelps moves up from regular beat officer to dealing with traffic offences, and then through robbery, vice and homicide, tussling with new partners each time. The late '40s is a tumultuous period for the LAPD, and Phelps, a man of moral standing and ambition, finds himself embroiled in the tussle between bent cops and the anti-corruption witch-hunts that seek to straighten out the force. Australian development studio Team Bondi is tight-lipped about how this larger narrative thread unravels, save for the fact that it is structured like a TV serial – each episode enclosing a single case, while feeding in to the grand sweep of the overall story.

This particular episode has the name 'The Driver's Seat' – words which splash across the screen in italics, like the title of an old cop show. But its deference to genre doesn't, from what we've seen, lead it into simply regurgitating Bogart-flavoured clichés. Nor does it feel like you are being presented with a prescribed puzzle – perhaps because the case in question, like many of those in the game, is drawn from real police records and newspaper reports of the time. Though Team Bondi has massaged the nebulous details of these crimes into clearer lines of inquiry, and occasionally conceived solutions to cases that were never actually solved, there is a fidelity to the complex situations and the subtleties of detection. Its elements of sleuthing may owe as much to *Phoenix Wright* as its vast urbanity does to *GTA*, but that sense of freedom familiar to open worlds is imported to the process of investigation, differentiating *LA Noire* from point-and-click mysteries. Depending on who you talk to, how much evidence you turn up and what you are able to deduce from these, cases might take any number of directions, or indeed fail altogether.

"With traditional adventure games, everything is based on what the designer wants you to figure out," says **Jeronimo Barrera**, vice president of product development at Rockstar. "We've kind of gone for a different approach which is more like real-world detective work."

"You don't have to find an anchor and combine it with a grapefruit," adds **Brendan McNamara**, co-founder of Team Bondi and the primary creative force behind the game. "Everyone knows cop shows – I think that keeps it reasonably approachable. Players know if you turn up at a crime scene you usually have to go and talk to someone and look at the clues around a dead body. Even if the game isn't that familiar to them, that format is."

Nonetheless, the crime scene investigation is almost overwhelming in its possibilities, with myriad details inviting scrutiny but needing to be carefully sorted for their relevance to the case. An officer at the scene informs us that the abandoned car is registered to a Eugene White, reported missing the previous evening, and as we pace around the vehicle we find a wallet lying in the dirt, yielding his name, address and picture, along with that of his wife. As Phelps pores over the scene his head





Some clues are extremely subtle. You discover from Eugene's wife that he recently bought a new pair of glasses. So why would you find his old, broken and repaired, glasses at the crime scene? Despite the fact that the conversations have been recorded line by line in an isolated white booth, any dramatic disjoint between actors is imperceptible, and the performances are generally of an extremely high standard





automatically tracks to items of interest; the player is able to pick up and articulate each one, the camera panning in as Phelps rotates a bloodied pipe to reveal the word 'Instaheat'. A pair of glasses throws up a brand name too, and Phelps observes that they've been broken and repaired – such commentary flags up possible clues, which are logged in your notebook. Tucked into the boot is a receipt for a pig, purchased by an A Hogan. The plot thickens.

Armed with this handful of disparate details, we turn to our first witness, Earl Wilkie, the local rail worker who called in the abandoned vehicle. It's little exaggeration to say that the rest of the game was conceived around the idea of interrogation, and it's quickly apparent why. Wilkie's face shifts between impatient and nervously deferential, eyes flicking, every part of it as alive and mobile as a real human face – and, vitally, just as readable. *LA Noire*'s facial animation, it seems, has scaled the precipitous slopes of the uncanny valley, leaving the likes of *Heavy Rain* still scrabbling at the escarpment below.

We open our questioning of Wilkie with a basic ice-breaker, and he describes how he came across the car, his curiosity aroused by its odd positioning. He phoned the police when he saw the blood, he says. We can now refer to a list of possible conversation topics scribbled in our notepad, the number and kind determined by the evidence gathered so far – and unlike the prescriptive mysteries of *Phoenix Wright* et al, we don't need to exhaust all the questions, or even uncover all the evidence, in order to make a case.

"When people talk to cops, they lie. If you accuse someone too often without evidence, they're going to clam up"





Brendan McNamara, co-founder, Team Bondi



Oliver Bao, head of R&D, Depth Analysis

"Do you know a Eugene White, Mr Wilkie?" we ask.

"No, sir. That ain't a name I'm familiar with," Wilkie replies, shaking his head, pouting adamantly, with a slight roll of the shoulders – movement that is natural and subtly confident. After these first opening shots, the interrogation turns into a game of verbal strategy, albeit one in which the mechanics are covered by a credible flow of conversation. A dial on the right of the screen indicates that we can choose to force, accuse or coax: stances which determine the broad direction of your retort, but, like *Mass Effect*, not its specific content.

Barrera interjects: do we believe Wilkie? We immediately second-guess ourselves – he seems perfectly convincing, but then maybe we're just being credulous. *LA Noire*'s faces are capable of such great subtlety that we worry

we might be deceived. We needn't over-think Wilkie's response, however, as McNamara explains: "We get people to do poker body language, like tells. As much as we want it to be subtle and naturalistic as possible, we also want people who buy the game to be able to read it, so we really try and sell that people are lying – but it's often not big enough for me. One of the actors will go: 'I just told a massive lie' and I'll ask if they can tell a bigger one."

We conclude that, given the absence of overt shiftiness, Wilkie is telling it straight, and opt to 'coax' him. Consequently, we ask if he'd seen the car before.

"As a matter of fact, I did," he says. "A couple of nights ago it was parked over there in the parking lot. I know most of the cars that park here regularly so it kind of stood out."

Next, we bring up the wallet, coyly asking if there was anything in it when he arrived. Wilkie is suitably indignant, chin jutting out as he says, "You accusing me of something, mister?" But he's also wringing his hands. What could he be hiding?

"Everyone is lying about something," says McNamara. "When you talk to cops that's what they say: you have to cut through all the other bullshit before you get to the stuff about the case. When people talk to cops they naturally lie because they don't want to get involved or whatever else – but what's important to the case? If you accuse someone too often without evidence, they're going to clam up on you."

Having weighed up the options, we decide to give Wilkie a taste of 'force'. "Do you want the patrolman to hold you down while we turn out your pockets, Mr Wilkie?" we ask with an aggressive swagger.

Wilkie decides that he doesn't like the sound of that. So, sure, he took a look in the wallet, but not because he intended to steal anything. There wasn't any money in there, anyway – "Not even change". He's emphatic and we can't help but believe him, even if that means we've failed to squeeze a single lead out of the interrogation.

Underpinning the astounding facial fidelity on display is a motion-capture technology called 'motion scan'. It's been developed at the Sydney-based Depth Analysis, a company McNamara founded with the explicit purpose of powering *LA Noire*. The result, as he describes it, is a 'lying simulator'.

"This system allows subtle human emotion to come through in a way which traditional animation doesn't," explains **Oliver Bao**, Depth Analysis' head of research and development. "We can use this feature to get actors to lie, and players can detect that they're trying to hide something. It's like you're talking to a real person – you can press their buttons and see how they react."

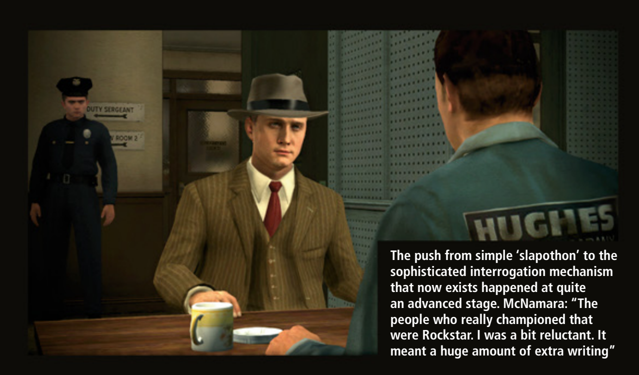
Motion scan is different from most other capture and animation systems (previously covered in depth in **E**210) which either use markers or video analysis to match gross facial movements to a pre-existing model, moving it by a form of puppetry. The process Depth Analysis favours is to continuously scan the entire shape of the actor's head, simultaneously capturing its texture and colour, not to mention the words coming out of its mouth.

"I've been doing mo-cap for 12 years," says McNamara. "I've been pleased with what we got out of it – but what I really wanted to do was to capture the outside of people and not their bones."

The Depth Analysis solution uses 32

ON THE LOOSE IN THE SPRUCE GOOSE

Demonstrating that police work involves a punchy action element as well as steadily paced sleuthing, we were shown a section from a mission investigating an explosion – based on a disaster at the O'Connor Electro-Plating Co in 1947. Team Bondi's version of events links the destruction to some of Howard Hughes' less-than-savoury subordinates, and the case culminates in a high-speed pursuit every bit as chaotic as those seen in Liberty City, and a brutal gunfight in the hangar containing Hughes' own mega-plane, the Spruce Goose. Firefights exchange period authenticity for fast-paced, accessible action: Phelps moves and finds cover in much the same way as Niko Bellic, but has the advantage of recharging health.



The push from simple 'slapothon' to the sophisticated interrogation mechanism that now exists happened at quite an advanced stage. McNamara: "The people who really championed that were Rockstar. I was a bit reluctant. It meant a huge amount of extra writing"

cameras, acting in pairs as range scanners, and a small, sound-proofed, white room, evenly lit to remove all shadows.

"It's the same technique used by the Dam Busters," says Bao. "They used two eyes to work out what height they were from the water. It's the same idea with our cameras – they're all calibrated so they know where they are from each other, so when they see a feature point they can estimate its depth."

The result is not so much an animation – indeed, animators are required to do little more than compose the moving model in a scene – but a 3D film of the actor, make-up and all. There's barely 20 minutes spent processing each piece of raw footage before it goes straight into the game.

"The way it works is that we have video editors working in the background as we record, so they can start editing straight away," Bao explains as he shows us around the inauspicious warehouse that serves as Depth Analysis' LA studio. "They cut off the junk bits, top and tail, and whenever there's downtime, like at lunch, they can show the takes to the director so he can select the best. It's very much like a factory."

We peek inside the white capture booth, its array of glaring light panels and cameras making it look like the helm of a far-future spaceship. **Michael McGrady** from the cop drama Southland sits in the captain's chair, patiently waiting for the final touches to his hair and make-up to be applied.

"We have to watch out for shine on the face," Bao explains, gently prodding McGrady's period-accurate bouffant. "Because we pick up colour and texture, we need to make it as a matt as possible so the cameras don't see hotspots. You've got the director's camera at the front



Two bars, labelled 'insight' and 'guilt', flank the conversation dial during interrogations. The former indicates the usefulness of any gleaned information, while the latter does not conclusively establish actual culpability, merely the evidence against. It can therefore prove misleading, which makes you wonder if its inclusion is necessary at all.

there, monitoring the character's performance. The director next door can talk to the actor and can pop up through the webcam on that monitor and show the script to him or reference videos."

Today, McGrady, who plays one of Phelps' partners, is doing cutaways: reaction shots for use when other characters are talking. His hard-bitten police officer isn't given to great displays of flamboyant emotion (in the good-cop-bad-cop routine he's clearly the one cracking his knuckles), yet the fidelity of the capture process is such that McGrady is able to get away with the subtlest of facial movements to express hints of sadness or sympathy.

McNamara leans into the microphone which allows him to communicate with the capture room. "Stop thinking about food," he instructs McGrady, who raises an eyebrow.

"We do it line by line," McNamara explains. "Sometimes they want the other part read to them, then we do that. Mike is left in limbo and has to listen to us for direction." He leans into the microphone again. "You have to listen for direction, don't you, Mike? But you never take it."

"Well, I pretend like I take it," McGrady shoots back.

Later, we talk to **Aaron Staton**, who plays protagonist Cole Phelps (and also Ken Cosgrove in the TV series Mad Men), about the differences between this capture process and working on-set.

"I think the biggest adjustment is the lack of an acting partner – not having another person there in the space," he says. "But part of being an actor is using your imagination to create the possibility of what a space could be and see something that isn't there."

"It's weird trying to humanise that process," McNamara agrees, "but the good part is that we've done all of it in mo-cap."

"Yeah, there's definitely a frame of reference," Staton says. "Almost everything we're doing in here we've already done as an ensemble [for full body mo-cap]. So as far as the timing of it and a general sense of what's going on, there's definitely a concrete frame of reference, but the trick is recalling that

"The script's up to 22,000 pages. That's two full years of a TV series and probably 12 feature films"





"Rockstar will hopefully start using [Depth Analysis' motion scan tech, pictured left] in a bunch of different games as well," McNamara says. "We've got an arrangement to do that." It's easy to imagine how it could be put to effective use in *Grand Theft Auto V*





Far from following easily repeated formulae, each case has its own unique details that make them feel like credible and organic investigations. One, in a nod to Farewell My Lovely, requires the player to spot the murder weapon resting on a nearby rooftop – reflected in the glass of an open skylight

Incidental conversation with your partners helps to flesh out '40s LA. "They comment about the case but they generally comment about the world," McNamara explains. "They're like newspaper stories – they might comment about the Russians getting the bomb, or the navy making 3D films." There are actual newspapers, too, created with plausible headlines



in an authentic way. We explore a few different options, do a few different takes on each line. Brendan will have his work cut out for him piecing it together."

This is no exaggeration, but then it seems Team Bondi isn't a studio to do things by halves.

"The script's up to 22,000 pages," McNamara explains. "That's two full years of a TV series and probably 12 feature films. It goes a lot of places!"

While being able to tell if someone is lying was always central to the game, early designs saw the interrogations play out in a somewhat less sophisticated way, as McNamara recalls: "Originally, we had it so that if you hit people they gave you more information – it just became this slapothon. We tried all sorts of things with the conversations to make them into a game. We did loads of sophisticated AI to try and do natural language stuff but in the end people wanted to make choices themselves – it's fundamental, we should have realised that quicker – and they wanted what they did to influence the outcome. That meant taking the story different places. Depending on what you ask, we have branches in the story. If you ask the right things you might get somewhere quicker, but if you get it wrong it might dead-end you and the story moves off somewhere else. You can play out the cases in different ways – some can play out in nine different ways."

FOUNDER, DESIGNER, WRITER, DIRECTOR

McNamara shares directorial duties with Mad Men's Michael Uppendahl, as well as being the co-founder of both Team Bondi and Depth Analysis, and the game's principal designer and writer. Such a concentration of responsibility hasn't always proved to be to the benefit of other developers, but McNamara comes across as unusually grounded and self-deprecating for someone of such auteur status.

"Am I a control freak? Probably," he says. "Might be hubris on my part too. But it's a cool bunch of people who've worked with me for a long time, and they put up with me. In terms of writing, people who I know who can really write say that what I do is writing-lite, because I just write dialogue – but I have other people that I write with. And since being here [in LA] I've met the Mad Men writing team and they think I'm crazy. They've been explaining to me how writing teams work on TV shows. I'm definitely going to look into that next time."

The player isn't alone as he navigates the twisted branches of the narrative, however. Get stuck and you can always speak to your partner, who'll offer a suggestion as to what the next step should be. In the case of The Driver's Seat, our partner is the irascible Bukowsky. He seems to resent Phelps' rapid rise through the force, but he's helpful enough to suggest we go and talk to Eugene White's wife, having exhausted the possibilities of the crime scene.

The drive to the White residence is uneventful, but it needn't be. While it's always possible to jump instantly between known locations, you'd be missing out on potentially useful dialogue with your partner, not to mention the many distractions LA has to offer. There is, for one thing, the staggering detail with which Bondi has recreated the city and its populace, who come and go with the natural cycle of day and night.

"I grew up in the post-Vietnam generation," McNamara says when we ask about the fascination with LA. "We were trying to get a sense of how a country could come out as the shining knight of WWII and go on this constant slide through Vietnam and all the rest. I think Hollywood is a good mirror for that,

because it had this veneer: the American Dream which it sold to the world."

But you don't need to dig far to find dirt. Certainly not in Team Bondi's LA, anyway – as you drive about you are likely to hear calls for assistance on as-yet-unassigned cases through the police radio, or spot robberies or car-jacking in progress. We manage to resist such distractions en route to the Whites' house, directed through the sprawl of LA by our partner. While the game deigns to have a *GTA*-style mini-map, an overlaid GPS route guide was presumably a step too far for the period dressing. Similarly, the game avoids *Mafia*'s stumbling block of rigorously recreating the unwieldy physics of 1940s vehicles – *LA Noire*'s cars might look the part, but they move with a bit more zip than their real-world counterparts ever did.

Upon arrival, we find Mrs White in a state of distress. She last saw her husband as he left to go for a drink with a

"The idea was that we could make a huge genre in movies and literature work in games when no one else had"

colleague called Arty Hogan – a name familiar to us from the receipt in the car's boot. But, as we take a look around the house, Mrs White's insinuation of a happy marriage seems dubious. They sleep in different bedrooms. In Eugene's room, close inspection of a picture frame reveals a dedication from an unknown woman. More suspicious still is the fact that the pipe we found at the crime scene matches a part missing from a recently ordered boiler at the house. Could Eugene White's assailant be closer to home?

We ask Mrs White about the picture frame, but she claims there's nothing to tell – it's simply a photo taken during a recent business trip. The questions go back and forth; when you accuse someone, there's usually some resistance and you have to resort to your notebook to supply the correct piece of evidence. When we accuse her of knowing more than she's letting on, Mrs White doesn't crumble until we point out the dedication written on the picture frame. Then it comes out: Eugene's been having an affair, and his wife does not have an alibi for the previous evening.

Nonetheless, she seems an unlikely killer – hardly of the build required to bludgeon someone into jam and lug the body elsewhere. More importantly, her quivering lip is convincing enough of her genuine concern and upset. We decide to pay pig-purchaser Arty Hogan a visit – using a nearby phone to call up the Records and Identification department for the address of the bar where he was to meet Eugene.

We find him in the back, the picture of guilt. He nonetheless evades the questions, until we pin the receipt to him. Finally he comes clean – and the truth is more farcical than sinister. Eugene hoped to cover up his elopement by faking his own death, persuading Hogan to help him kill a pig and splatter the car in its blood, while depositing a few personal possessions around the scene. After a few more threats of less-than-orthodox interrogation techniques, Hogan reveals that Eugene is holed up at his house; but if your line of questioning fails here, you can always follow Hogan back home and surprise the pair of them.

While the pace of the game has been methodical so far, it's evident that Team Bondi has worked out ways in which to add an action element to the climax of each case. Car chases, fist fights or shootouts (see 'On the loose in the Spruce Goose') inject the adrenaline required to grab the attention of Rockstar's existing action-fed audience. In this instance, Eugene makes a run for it, diving out of a window and pelting across rooftops with you in pursuit. The chase comes to an end when your partner skids around a corner in his car and heads Eugene off – but there are



Depth Analysis' LA studio has been set up to take advantage of the local acting talent, but Bondi has been reticent to go after big Hollywood names. McNamara explains why: "I actively tried to [avoid big names] because I want to go to it and see that person as much as I can for the first time rather than the ten other parts previously. That's one thing I particularly hate about going to the pictures – as much as I love Robert De Niro, I know what his face can do."

There's been a great response among actors to the project, McNamara says, pointing to the fact that the technology marks a watershed in bringing performances into a game almost unadulterated. "There's definitely a level of humanity in this thing now," he says. "It's been a line-in-the-sand moment for the actors."




"At the start of the game Phelps is doing things for the right reasons," McNamara says. "But that doesn't necessarily work in the world he's thrown into. Each case has its own story, just like a TV show, but we have an overarching story for him"


As you approach the bar to find Hogan, a drunk harasses you to get him a drink. There are many such incidental characters – and every citizen is modelled with the same attention to detail lavished upon the main cast. Bao puts the number of individual faces used in the game at 327







LA Noire's dialogue shows a keen ear for police patter without sliding into cliché. Its delivery, too, is to be applauded. Although there is occasionally some unavoidable exaggeration in order to indicate deceit, the performances are otherwise of a calibre well above that of usual videogame fare



As a neat little coda to The Driver's Seat, McNamara reveals that it too was based upon a real case – and, after serving his sentence, Eugene ended his affair and was forgiven by his wife





other possible outcomes: draw your gun and fugitives may reassess their chances and give themselves up.

"We hope she was worth it, Eugene," Phelps says as he slaps on the cuffs.

"You want to do projects that get you out of bed," McNamara says. "Whether it can get you out of bed for five years straight is another story. That's a long time. Even [*LA Noire*'s] technology is a huge challenge: there's a huge data side to that. The risk Rockstar took was buying in to my idea – that we could make a huge genre in movies and literature work in games when no one else had."

"For us it's always good when you are crafting something and you don't have a point of reference from other games," counters Barrera. "Even though you could say it's like *GTA* because you have this open city you can run around in, it's paced completely differently. To us that's what we have to sell: 'Look, it's not super-high action like *GTA*, though there is action, but it is as compelling because of the interactions the characters are having'."

We wonder whether an audience trained by *GTA* and its wannabes to associate open worlds with mayhem will be able to settle into *LA Noire*'s more sedate rhythm. It's not yet clear what disincentives have been applied to stop the player ploughing through traffic and murdering the citizenry, but one thing it has in its favour is a powerful context, both in the careful drawing of the setting and the characters in it.

"The difference between this and *GTA* is that you play a guy who's out there trying to do good," Staton says. "Everyone will initially want to punch old ladies – I probably would – but people are then going to be interested in the story and solving the cases. And seeing what other old ladies they can punch."

"Hopefully we'll make the audience take a few leaps," agrees McNamara. "That's always scary but I think a lot of people will appreciate that stuff too. We're never trying to dumb it down for people. I think you should assume your audience is pretty smart."

There's no doubt that *LA Noire* is ambitious, a technical marvel and a thrilling hybrid of genres. At such a scale it is fair to wonder whether it can sustain the qualities evident in our demonstration – being subtle, smart and solidly produced – but if any company can oversee the radical evolution of the open world from chaotic sandbox to sprawling urban drama then it is surely Rockstar. Even without that reassuring name, Team Bondi's evident ability to create human intrigue in this immense and painstakingly rendered vision of LA is already something that demands meticulous investigation.





GUNS N' ROBOTS

HOW PLATINUM GAMES' VANQUISH AIMS TO BOOST BEYOND GEARS AND SOMERSAULT TO THE TOP OF THE CHARTS

Japan's reduced influence on the worldwide videogame market has had a marked effect, with most of the region's developers and publishers seeking to establish footholds in the west and land the elusive hit that can smash sales records as well as borders. But what do you say to one of Japan's most respected developers, a man accustomed to doing things his way, when he's preparing to take on the likes of *Gears Of War*? **Shinji Mikami** just laughs. "I don't think people will associate this game with it," the director of *Vanquish* says. "*Gears Of War* is simply a different type of game."

Hardly. But Mikami's reluctance to be drawn is understandable. At the announcement of *Vanquish*, the fourth and last Platinum Games production to be published by Sega under the companies' current terms, it couldn't be clearer that a lot is on the line. *MadWorld* underperformed at retail. *Bayonetta*'s shifted over a million units, yet producer **Atsushi Inaba** claims Platinum was "disappointed" with that. And *Infinite Space* may be a great game (see p98), but space strategy on DS isn't going to have tills crashing. Sega has flown the world's press to Tokyo for this, the CEO and other senior figures have taken their seats, and even Toshihiro Nagoshi's turned out. Sega would never say so, but it's not enough for Platinum just to deliver great games any more. *Vanquish* has to be a huge seller. And that means the western audience takes precedence over the Japanese one.

Doesn't it? "We all know the facts of the past," says Mikami. "I think that the Japanese culture is specific, deep, and hard to comprehend from the outside. If you want to make something accessible for a large audience, it is hard to make something very Japanese." So is this a game for the kind of audience that ignores games like *Okami*? "I can't deny overseas

TITLE: **VANQUISH**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **PLATINUM GAMES**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **CHRISTMAS 2010**



Your teammates are a mix of standard-issue grunts and others who're in possession of slightly less dynamic suits than yours. One thing they're good at is attracting fire from enemies, which makes your job a little easier

is very much in our mind." *Vanquish*, then, is nothing less than what it looks like: a thirdperson shooter that combines the flair of Platinum with the production values and laser-targeting of consumers we expect as standard from western developers. And about time too.

Mikami arrives on stage in a playful mood. He takes time to excoriate a US website for its miserable review of *God Hand* ("Seriously, thanks"), and ensures that his audience understands "this is not *P.N.03*". We'll come back to that. After an introduction focusing heavily on the word 'intensity', Mikami directs *Vanquish*'s hero, Sam, into cover, at which point the armour-clad warrior lights up a cigarette. Keeping in mind the avatar's resemblance to Solid Snake, it's clear that this is Platinum Games in full swing: if *Bayonetta* taught us anything, it's the joy this studio takes in homage and reference.

We're walked through the core abilities of the Augmented Reality Suit (unfortunately abbreviated to ARS), and *Vanquish* finally comes into its own. Boost mode sees Sam drop to his knees, jet thrusters firing from the back of his legs and propelling him forward at incredible speed. It's many times faster than the roadie run as a basic cover-to-cover move, as well as functioning as an assault weapon in itself.

Example: enemies deploy cover as they advance, screwing up your approach with new bulwarks. There's a size-12 solution. Sam thrusts forward at such a lick that when he slams into the barricades enemies are hiding behind he sends both structure and cowering baddies flying. He can transition from the boost into a simple landing (executed with an elegant somersault into the standard running motion), crash into a wall and prepare to shoot, or just dropkick something nasty in the face.

Next up is Augmented Reaction Mode, aka slowdown, which gives enough time to blast away several enemies. As Mikami boosts forward, *Vanquish* offers another spectacular moment: a ship flying above seems to be descending too quickly – and sure enough it's soon overhead, its undercarriage dragging down entire sections of the walls ahead of and around your forces. Once it's passed, an onrushing force of robots means that there's no time to check for survivors.

As you'd expect from a Platinum production, the action is rendered beautifully. Your combat suit's pristine white surfaces interlock and morph with clockwork precision, an aesthetic that carries over into weaponry. You don't switch between guns; instead, what you're holding immediately unfolds and reassembles on the fly.

The other part of this science-fiction equation is the enemy: they're all robots. Every single one, apparently. "If you say robots, people instantly think they're boring to fight," Mikami says, "but we're really focused on showing how that isn't the case. How they get shot, every motion when they move, how they fall apart, and how that makes you feel as a player is something we've tried many times to get right." In still screens you'd be forgiven for seeing them as somewhat similar to *Mass Effect*'s Geth, but what Mikami says is realised in movement – these robots manoeuvre with a frighteningly efficient grace and blow up well when their time comes. Seeing one down a fellow soldier and immediately vault a barrier to finish them off suggests a cold logic that could be, in the right battles, as engaging as any meatbag.

Through the whole demo *Vanquish* moves in and out of cutscenes fluidly, their brevity and the seamless switching between your forward motion and the snippets rendering them relatively unobtrusive. As for what's being said, it's as gruff as *Gears*, with plenty of military babble and technospeak mixed in, and it's a fair bet that this aspect of *Vanquish* will prove either wholly forgettable or, if we're lucky, as unintentionally self-parodic as Epic's

SUIT HOLDS ONE

There's no multiplayer in *Vanquish*: no co-op, no online, nothing. What a refreshing change. Mikami says development began "with the multiplayer component in mind", but "after a certain point in development we realised we had a very fun game experience that couldn't accommodate online features like co-op without some big alterations. I mean, we would have had to cut some of the coolest stuff to concentrate on online. So I decided that that was not the way to go." "Our goal is to deliver a very polished and enjoyable action experience," Inaba ventures, "and meeting that goal will be an achievement in itself."



Shinji Mikami, director



Atsushi Inaba, producer





Vanquish's palette may not seem particularly inspired in still images, but in motion there's always something firing, exploding or sparking to offset the muted tones



There really is no arguing with an enhanced haymaker, and close combat plays a significant part against the standard robot enemies. No doubt a selection of other suit abilities exist to feed into this 'field bruiser' role

testosterone-fest. Lines like "I'm gonna need a bigger gun" at least suggest that it's somewhat self-aware.

Back to the demonstration, and Mikami prepares to hand over the joypad. *Vanquish* looks great so far, but no more than a snazzier version of what we already know. An unassuming fellow who's apparently the best player within Platinum is wheeled out, and he takes control of the game as a new sequence begins with your squad rushing forward, one team member in a powersuit that dwarfs your own in terms of size, towards a background dotted with space warfare and its debris. Another huge ship coasts overhead, explosions rattling its underside, a separate hulk of a ship swooping under.

When the first robots appear, Sam immediately boosts over to their location and begins with a head-annihilating uppercut. The robot simply isn't there any more. He then boosts into the next of the group and dropkicks it, triggering slow-mo as he flips away, picking out multiple opponents from this new vantage point ten feet above the battlefield. A sophisticated combination of effects blur and jar the visuals throughout the sequence, emphasising each blow given and taken.

An ED-209-alike stomps forward, letting rip at your buddies, and Sam decides to intervene. Using what looks suspiciously like a previously un-mentioned homing jump, he pops off its pilot, lands atop the mech and takes control, unleashing a punishing barrage at a nearby group squatting behind cover. Once they're atomised, he picks off the remaining troops at his leisure and drops down as reinforcements arrive. No need for the big guns this time – it's an EMP grenade followed by the dropkick-bounceback-slowdown manoeuvre that does for this mob, before a quick crouch behind cover and a cigarette.

A crowd of mini-robots obviously based on wretches pours down the stairs towards your scattered forces, but they're not nearly as worrying as an enemy slightly larger than the normal size which seems to identify Sam as the main threat and immediately begins hunting him down. First things first: the cigarette butt is flicked in the thing's general direction and, in the same breath, Sam zooms to a new location. He has to boost quickly and steal shots in any spare seconds to stay ahead,

"If you say robots, people instantly think they're boring to fight, but we're really focused on showing that isn't the case"

knocking back the enemy as he whittles down its health. The coup de grace is delivered with a shotgun blast to the midsection… and the thing keeps crawling. Its hands desperately grasping for Sam's head, its circuitry contorted in a very un-mechanical display of anger, *Vanquish*'s hero coolly delivers one, two shotgun blasts to the face, and finally the haymaker of justice concludes the debate.

Time for its bigger colleague, and with it the most exhilarating and disappointing section of the presentation – the type of action we've all seen before many times, mixed in with new ideas. It's a mechanical spider, for starters, with weak joints that you shoot until a core appears, which you then pound away at. You need to



THE LATE NIGHT DOUBLE FEATURE PICTURE SHOW

The plot? Well, your mission instructions come from an operative known as Elena, while Sam himself is one of the DARPA researchers responsible for the suit's design – DARPA is, of course, a real-world entity as well as the employer of Donald Anderson of *MGS* fame. *Vanquish* is set in the near future, and those naughty Russians have taken over a space colony and used it to attack San Francisco. The Americans respond by sending a supersoldier to sort everything out. The setting is this Soviet-controlled space colony, 10km by 27km in size. Clearly you won't be able to explore all of it, since this isn't an open-world game, but Mikami calls it a "large-scale war field", so we should expect to get a good look around the place.

The things this suit can do are the core of *Vanquish*, and we've a strong suspicion that there's a boost-assisted jump in there to let you instantly get up to enemies like these. And then if you had a combination homing attack…

time dodging its missiles carefully, but otherwise it's a surprisingly unengaging encounter. However, after the core's taken enough punishment the mechanical beast gets mad and another type of action manifests itself – a bullet-hell-thick array of missiles launched from its carapace. Sam has to boost for his life, screaming around the cover and grooves in the arena's floor as the projectiles remain just a hair behind him. As the final missile falls and he stands unscathed, the arachnid decides it's had enough of being a game cliché and morphs into a movie one: the Terminator. Except it's about 60 feet tall. We can live with that, or at least we're happy to die trying. This is a slightly more dynamic foe and it's obviously, but for the skill of the demonstrator, a stiff challenge. But it's still a game of weak spots and glowing cores until a QTE downs the robot for a last round of intense blasting at the core. A huge explosion brings the battle to a close, but hold on… a QTE?

Mikami has no truck with our reservations: "There are lots of things you can't tell about this game just by looking at it." To this end, there'll be a pre-release demo to try to tempt wary consumers, but it's clear that what *Vanquish* lacks in originality it makes up for in the combination of its elements. By far the most exciting moment in the demonstration is the combination of abilities into one fluid attack and, given that the game is running on a heavily optimised version of the engine used in creating *Bayonetta* (Mikami is keen to emphasise it is "100 per cent Platinum Games developed!") it seems this idea of combining discrete abilities into single offensive sequences is what Mikami obliquely refers to many times as "the action experience core" so crucial to *Vanquish*.



This enemy doesn't know how much trouble it's in for. There are three transitions out of the boost we've seen, but the most exciting thing about it is simply the sensation of movement as you tear around and slam to grinding stops

Now's the time to return to *P.N.03*. The original comparisons were based entirely on visual style, and Mikami admits that "some of the design, like the armour, has been transmitted from the *P.N.03* I had in mind." Meaning, presumably, the seeds of *Vanquish* can be found in the concept of *P.N.03* rather than the finished *P.N.03* – an acrobatic shooter that was certainly interesting, but too finicky for classic status. "Yes, in a way this is true," Mikami says. "I remember that initially the *P.N.03* character was equipped with guns, but because of changes in our development schedule and conditions we could not have the character with the guns any more [laughs], so instead we had to settle for beams going out from the hands."

"Action games and shooters impose tons of information you have to process. Lots of enemies and allies, and you need to think how you are going to display and organise cover"

The importance of all of this? We get a distinct impression that *Vanquish* is about making a player do things that look cool and having fun that way as much as it is about the thrill of a good headshot. When talking about judging the difficulty levels, Mikami says "there's a wide range from casual players to normal to hard and then god hard, but basically the parameters set for the regular enemies are almost the same between these levels." The killer phrase: "Fighting them is about showing off your skill, but when it comes to the big boss battles that's where you'll start to see the difference."

When it comes to challenge, Platinum is the studio responsible for one of the deepest fighting games of all time in *Bayonetta*, which included a mode to let you complete the campaign using just one button, and of course there's Mikami's interesting experiment with adaptive difficulty in *God Hand*. "While developing this shooter I've come to think that it is very similar to sports games, simulations," he says. "Action games and shooters impose tons of information you have to process – lots of enemies and allies – and you need to think how you are going to display and organise cover. It's a huge amount to handle. If you put in too many things, players may find some of it is unnecessary or even goes against the game experience." Weapons lying around are highlighted, and though we see plenty of clips being changed, it seems as if everything but grenades has unlimited ammo, part of a welcome new trend.

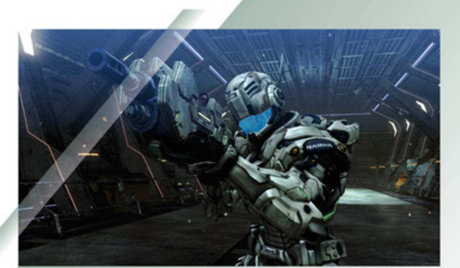
The bone-crunching types among us are also well catered for: each mission's completion screen has a legion of different statistics, including the likes of mission time, cover usage and distance travelled. "In terms of those, there's something of the past and the games I used to play as a kid where you get these stats," Mikami says. A score-attack bent? "Well, yeah, but the main reason for these things to be displayed is we were thinking about what would be good and humorous to show to the player – how much you were taking cover, or jumping out, or travelling distances, or taking the enemy head-on." Will these be tied in to anything other than leaderboards and pride? Mikami counters: would the readers of **Edge** like a 'Chicken' achievement? Somehow, we suspect not.

Vanquish is a new breed. Some might even call it cynical. It's certainly aware of the marketplace, but there's a bravery in a game like this from a studio like Platinum. Thirdperson shooters demand considerable resources to develop, for an uncertain return in a saturated marketplace. *Vanquish* isn't an *Army Of Two* or a *Dark Sector*, simply by virtue of its genuinely new ideas, but while Mikami may be the genius behind *Resident Evil 4* and many more big-league hits, he hasn't developed within the contemporary thirdperson shooter genre. Even the game's name seems slightly at odds with what we expect, more of an instruction than a statement, a verb where you expect a noun.

But *Vanquish* looks to be quite some spectacle, and going on Mikami's past form you have to expect it to maintain momentum throughout. It has big ambitions and big competition, with a lot riding on it for both Platinum and Sega, and one big question: just how will a western audience respond to a Japanese thirdperson shooter? There's no answer. But with Mikami at the helm at least one thing is certain: only someone who doesn't like great games would sit this one out.



Images such as this (right) can't help but bring to mind the *Halo* series, but *Vanquish*'s approach to armour and weapon design feels more biological, even if it's entirely mechanical



SUMMON UP THE POWER OF THE...

God Hand! It was a theme of our recent evening with Mikami from first to last, and you sense that if he gets the platform for it, he'll talk and talk. "So, I've released a lot of titles before," he begins, "and I feel that, perhaps specifically with regard to *God Hand*, I was given too much freedom to make that game just as I liked. It didn't sell too well!" He goes on to refer to *Vanquish*'s highest difficulty setting as 'god hard', which may have been just for the benefit of this interview, before adding "we're definitely going for something a little more massmarket that will appeal to a wider audience. Certainly a bigger one than *God Hand* did! We both [Platinum and Sega] knew that these were points we had to address from the very beginning, and *Vanquish* is the result of that."



LET 'EM RIP

BRINGING TOGETHER THE MEN BEHIND BLACK, THE VISION OF GOLDENEYE, AND THE ENGINE INSIDE DIRT AND GRID, IS BODYCOUNT THE MOST IMPORTANT FPS OF THIS GENERATION?

It took three years to make Criterion's *Black*, the first ending with a private demo at E3 that had everyone telling stories – especially those who hadn't actually seen it. Loud, fast and destructive, swapping streets of mayhem for corridors of death, it was quickly dubbed the '*Burnout* of the firstperson shooter'. The press went home to tell of explosions "big enough to kill Death itself" and shotguns unleashing "their deadly children", while the dev team, recalls co-creator **Stuart Black**, went on to experience "two years of shit".

"What we learned is that if it doesn't work after two months, it's probably never going to work. Basically, everything about *Stranglehold* [Midway's combo-scoring, table-hopping sequel to movie Hard Boiled] ended up being what *Black* could have been. We had these things called Collateral Kills: all this stuff falling down on people, and all the problems like physics and it meaning that this guy couldn't move from that spot. And we spent a couple of years trying to make that stuff work when it just never would. It would never get better than what *Stranglehold* eventually was."

Then, just nine months before release day, an epiphany: to make the ultimate gun game, you've got to get boring. Doors, windows, walls, armour: you have to bore through the lot to make killing people fun. "It's ripping that shit apart and, rather than a single thing falling down and hitting someone, increasing the potential for someone getting hit, which means blowing up more stuff."

But when you're that close to release, another thing it means is cutbacks. *Black*'s AI "never understood cover so we had to fake that stuff up as best as possible". Its campaign "was a great second-to-second experience but nothing else. There was no sense of progression and no change – you finish it and you're done". It could have had multiplayer "but we couldn't sync up the physics, just didn't know how to do it. And we didn't want to just bolt on multiplayer without them".

None of this stopped *Black* scoring 8 in **Edge**, being an FPS of rare – or should we say Rare? – understanding. Its motto: if shooting isn't its own reward, then what's the point of a firstperson shooter? Like *GoldenEye*, it knows that to find what makes the genre tick, you have to literally follow the action. Gun, bullets, victim: focus on those and your aim is good. Now it's the turn of *Bodycount*, "a very pure, very focused shooting experience", to pull the trigger.

This "soft FPS", insists Codemasters' new Guildford studio, is not *Black 2*. Several of that game's strongest minds are heading up key aspects of production, from design to programming to art, but the 70-odd staff have backgrounds covering the entire genre. And besides, says lead programmer **Jon Creighton**, referring to the actual *Black 2* aborted by EA, "this is not the game we would have made three years ago".

Hearing the team explain what a soft shooter is isn't a world apart from actually playing one, the targets being "those games" and the hero being this one. It soon gets messy, the shots coming thick and fast, aimed at even the best of them.

"A major thing for me was Lady Gaga. I saw her at Glastonbury in July [when even her breasts exploded] and was just blown away by her performance: the power of it, the creativity. So I looked on YouTube at all the other stuff she's doing, and how she's reinvigorating pop music in general in America," Black recalls. "I find that incredibly exciting. And then I looked over my software collection and thought: 'Man, this is all so nerdy and beardy'. We've got so lazy, self-absorbed and self-referencing. I think back to the original *Wipeout* and the first *Tomb Raider* on Saturn, those were the high-water mark for me. Games that broke out, referencing mass culture and feeding back into it. So few games have done it since."

Jittery and gestural with hoodie down, hair long, cigarettes on desk and no coffee in sight, Black is one explosive

"I THINK BACK TO THE ORIGINAL WIPEOUT AND THE FIRST TOMB RAIDER. THOSE WERE THE HIGH-WATER MARK FOR ME. GAMES THAT BROKE OUT. SO FEW GAMES HAVE DONE IT SINCE"

TITLE: **BODYCOUNT**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**







From top: *Bodycount* co-creator Stuart Black, lead programmer Jon Creighton, and art director Max Cant

individual. How any building withstood a meeting between him and former colleague and fellow idealist Alex Ward is anyone's guess, but apparently it did because this, we learn, was the environment in which *Black* was born. Now it's home to a Codemasters outfit created three years ago with just one member of staff, growing through what boss **Adrian Bolton** calls "a really painful process of never just filling a slot. There've been some scenarios where there've been key positions we wanted to fill but the candidates just aren't there". *Bodycount*, he adds, was one of those games that went once round the conference table before being immediately green-lit.

"It's a nasty thing, shooting someone with a weapon," Black says. "So how do we make that more generally appealing? People get caught up with USPs – on-rails sections, vehicle sections, on-walls sections, whatever – and they forget about the shooting. By all means, knock yourself out with all that other stuff, but don't use it as a crutch. It distracts for a while but it doesn't compensate."

Bodycount, then, promises the loudest action since *Lost Planet*, and in all likelihood the most destructive full stop. Its story, which unlike *Black*'s is vague in all the right ways, casts you as John Doe, a natural-born soldier likened to Steve McQueen, Josh Hartnett or anyone invented by Black's other idol, JJ Abrams. "Doe is what we call an 'adept'," Black explains, "someone who has innate ability and affinity for combat. But he's un-honed and untrained, and through this rite of passage he'll find the measure of himself." Or, to his employers, he's an "expendable asset used to ensure successful outcomes".



"IT'S A NASTY THING, SHOOTING SOMEONE WITH A WEAPON. SO HOW DO WE MAKE THAT MORE GENERALLY APPEALING?"

Where he's deployed is something he learns the hard way, one placeholder cutscene showing him kicking back at home (a trailer), taking a call from a mysterious female operator, realising he's been drugged as his eyes fall shut, and being kicked from a plane into the skies above Africa. Waking up as he hits the water, he hears a second soothing voice in his earpiece. "Your safety is my concern," it says. "Welcome to The Network."



You'll know when you've shot someone with *Bodycount*'s guns, according to Cant: "Either they'll fly off a balcony or the balcony will fly off." Or, as we can see in this case, the entire side of a building and its contents will go flying

Existing in what Black calls a state of "heightened ridiculousness", *Bodycount* indulges the mother of modern conspiracy theories: the New World Order. The world as we know it has ended, and by the time we figure that out, the battle for the next one will be well underway. "We're all screwed," grins art director **Max Cant**, "past the point where we can un-fuck ourselves. So these two organisations are the new world beginning to poke through, vying for control of what the future's going to be like. It's not a comfortable transition, it's a schism, and The Network wants to be on top of the survivors."

Unfortunately for everyone in between, the opposing side, simply called Target, isn't rolling over. Cant: "We're not giving them the justification of naming them, we just kill them because they're not us. They've been around for ages but







BULLETS OVER BROADBAND

One of Black's biggest frustrations with *Black* was the absence of multiplayer, something *Bodycount* has taken in its stride. All of the game's 23 levels are loaded into memory to allow drop-in/drop-out co-op, and the first modes are already past the prototype stage. "This was something of key importance when starting this project – it had to work in multiplayer. There are some great network coders up here and it's surprisingly quick how they got that stuff in. So now we've got 12-player deathmatch with all the physics and all the shredding all synced up."





In case you're wondering, the lack of variety to the screenshots is a sign of *Bodycount*'s youth, few announcement visits offering this much access at just the pre-alpha stage. However, these images are entirely faithful to realtime action



now they're shirty because our guys are forcing their hand and they're starting to lose, but they do have the benefit of absolutely unlimited power at their disposal. These are the guys who set up things like the Masons." Black's take is even simpler: "They're a bunch of nutters. Their motto is that combat is the crucible of change. They're fucked-up neo-Nazis with the mentality that goes with it."

The idea of a future "poking through" is a literal one. In venues like an African 'Medicenter', where trucks used as battering rams have let rioters in, a vast and peculiar monolith (pictured right) serves as Target's HQ. Resembling a PS2, it's physically and visually impenetrable, part of an aesthetic described as "stealth made by Apple or Bang & Olufsen".

"Our organisation [The Network] uses a lot of curved forms because it's interested in wrapping its nastiness in a warm exterior, whereas these guys are categorically and philosophically opposed to curves because they're a sign of acquiescence," Cant says. And, as the star of a game built around the notion – and mechanic – of 'shredding' everything in sight, you're the agent of metamorphosis. As you blast away the concrete standing between you and whatever's gunning for you, you're cracking open the chrysalis. Then your bullets stop, defied by Target's barely conceivable technologies. "We want to you feel like the apes in 2001."

The game's high-level payoff, then, is actually infiltrating these bases and becoming, says Cant, "a bull in a china shop". Pearly white and dressed like a scene from Gattaca, these interiors are the buildings' soft underbellies, built in painstaking detail simply to be destroyed. Cant spent much of his time on *Black* making entire rooftops out of breakable glass, partly to see if he could break Renderware as well. Now he's talking about using under-floor illumination to make the glass sparkle as it falls, or non-Newtonian substances (solid when hit, liquid when pushed) as building blocks, or making enemies out of obsidian. "My favourite quote is Jules Verne: 'Anything one man can imagine, other men can make real'. We want to push this as far as we can before it gets really strange."

It's Ego, an engine that's already made the world's fanciest racing games on just a fraction of the usual budgets, that's making it possible, says Creighton. "It's been critical in us getting up and running, and the great thing is that there's a huge number of talented people working on it who are still in the company, and you can just pick up the phone. The tech is solid – it's shipped four games now – but the important thing is that it's not overly complicated. And you don't need huge amounts of rendering power.

"I do get a little bit tired of developers having this one-upmanship when it comes to their engine, where they say it can 'max





Anyone who blasted their way through the closing level of *Black* will recall it dropping frames like a bullet-hell scrolling shooter. A similar trial by fire awaits the Ego engine here, which has fared admirably so far with the large but relatively destruction-lite outdoor areas of *Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising* and the dense particles of the more constrained *Dirt 2* and *Grid*

out 360'." He sighs. "A 16-year-old could max out PS3 just by getting it to work out pi to 1,000 decimal points – it'll be sitting there for months. It's about using it cleverly and letting the artists and designers get the best out of it. And people do use a lot of film rips and stuff, but the danger you get into is that it's another visual medium, and a very well established one with a strong language. And people see it and think: 'Well, that's your art direction, you just want to make it look like that film'. No, we *don't*, we want to make it look like something different, and the only way to do that is to get the bloody thing up on screen."

There's plenty that's remarkable about the level we're about to play, set in that Medicenter full of gunmen. But the show-stealer is that it was built, from scratch and to a standard many devs would consider late-alpha, in just two months. Not a great deal happens in conventional terms, except the most important bit: you shoot things, then you smile.

Black wants *Bodycount* to be a game in which the hardware takes centre stage, not just in terms of personal firepower but mobile artillery – helicopters, Predator drones, etc – that you can almost reach out and touch. That's as much the job of its world and enemies as its guns, one roaring salvo enough to rip layers from a wall, the masonry popping off to achieve a "floating bricks" look. If there's rebar underneath, that's the sign that it's partially bulletproof. If there isn't – and there seldom is – you can keep on drilling all the way through, creating an entire doorway or just a hole in someone's head. Pretty much everything before or beside anything you're likely to shoot is completely, gradually destructible. Even the trashing of a crate has a beginning, middle and end, with enough parts for you to see the type of ammo inside while it's still largely intact.

So we spend much of our demo time chiselling, making *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* look a little old before its time. Other things to note – and while nothing in the demo is considered placeholder, everything is 'iterative' – include an analogue cover system that makes smooth transitions from running and strafing to crouching and leaning. There's a welcome comeback for health packs – rechargeable health has its place, says Black, but makes you feel "ephemeral" – and a balletic response when ragdolls get shot. There's a hint of Cant's tonal philosophy for the game: not *Greys Of War*, but one that trades obvious pop colours for things like yellows and ochre, the game preferring ill-fated tourist spots to tiresome battlefields.

"We want arcade tactics," Black says, "not military doctrine tactics but things that are readable and visible to the player. If I'm going to be flanked then I want to see that guy running around and flanking me, not spawning behind me and shooting me in the arse. We don't want bot behaviour, that feeling that you're fighting against another person. It's about taking on two-, three- or four-man fights and making distinctions about how those guys are going to help and support each other. We want close-quarters combat –



FINE AIMS

Don't think that with all these big ideas floating around, the little things will get missed. Black's claim of being "just another gamer" is hard to dispute when he has such a long and sustainable list of bugbears. "That's a very loose stick there," he says of the PS3 joypad, before assuring us that *Bodycount* will, like Criterion's games, prove it's not a handicap. The game's FOV will not, for once, make you feel like you've headbutted the opposite wall when you walk through a door. And pepper-potting – the rather rigid tactic of hopping methodically between obvious cover points – could be enhanced by simply widening corridors and doubling the furniture, creating dozens of opportunities.



SCORES OF WOUNDED

For those smitten by the purity of *Black*, its failure to blossom on a second playing was the biggest letdown. All part of its shambolic construction, says Black, and ancient history to *Bodycount* thanks to class- and combo-based scoring. Chaining kills gathers intel points you can use to upgrade weapons, but who you shoot can be crucial. Wound an enemy and a medic might come to their rescue, providing a higher bonus. Keep going through a squad and you'll draw out the real jackpot: the commander. Still to be confirmed is whether or not points will be scored for environmental damage, what with so much of it possible.





At the bottom left you'll see the rather generous helping of first-aid kits in the test level, *Bodycount* using a tried-and-tested system of refilling health segments. So if you survive just a bit of peril, you might yet be fit again. Dive into too much, though, and you risk more lasting damage

I'm not interested in shooting little guys on the horizon – of between 20 and 50 metres. And it's class-based combat: there are medics, scavengers who run around picking up intel, and tech specialists who call in Little Bird airstrikes and deploy mobile turrets.

"Of course we use spawning – you can't avoid it – but we spawn early and use interlocking patrols, utilising the fact that the player's the key variable. So they're not two separate engagements, but you'll become so involved in the first that the second comes along and joins it,

"WE WANT ARCADE TACTICS. NOT MILITARY TACTICS BUT THINGS THAT ARE READABLE AND VISIBLE TO THE PLAYER"



Black hates pedestrian combat experiences, including any you'd sooner run than fight through. So here's hoping this section isn't a repeat of the moribund tank battles in *Killzone 2*

so it escalates into a larger fight. Or we'll have eight-man battles from the word go. It doesn't have to be clever emergent AI, you just need a large clockwork mechanism that becomes complex enough for those things to come out of it."

So the ideas keep coming for the whole afternoon, and the excitement around *Bodycount* grows. At no point is this game pitched as the shooter "of mass destruction", "of the future", "with a point to make about peace-war philosophy" or anything of the sort. It might be all of them, but seems to regard such buzzwords as self-defeating and vulgar. Its goal is to be a more gratifying gun game than any other, and to do it in a manner worthy of the second decade of this century, not the penultimate decade of the last. Now that really does sound like a call of duty.

An audience with…

Gavin Cheshire & Bryan Marshall

The world according to Codemasters, courtesy of the men at the top

The worst you can say of Codemasters' recent history is that it made the best of a bad situation. Recovering from a run of thirdparty duds, from the aborted *Hei$t* to the best-aborted *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty*, it kept its own house in order by revolutionising its driving games, the first *Dirt* making more in the US than all the previous *Colin McRae*s put together. The phenomenally successful *Lord Of The Rings Online*, meanwhile, has made good the experience gleaned from publishing *RF Online* and *ArchLord*.

Britain's last great publisher is motoring again. You've read about its new Guildford studio and thrilling FPS *Bodycount*, and also *F1 2010*, the latest from the outfit formerly known as Swordfish. Its "in-sourcing" studio in Kuala Lumpur continues to furnish both with triple-A assets, everyone sharing each other's contributions to the ever-evolving Ego engine. So, what next? We ask **Gavin Cheshire** (VP, Codemasters Studios) and **Bryan Marshall** (chief technical officer) just that.

How have your externally developed games affected Codemasters' direction?
Gavin Cheshire: It wasn't until about 14 months ago that we took over all the external stuff. I guess if we're being honest, we just got what was there out in a rough-and-ready timeframe. But it's really about the other things that we changed last year: creating an environment within Codemasters for publishing and steering, and sensible thought processes on what is and isn't a good game. We've being doing that now for about ten months. That's probably had far more influence than any of those poor products – though by the time it got to the final six months, we actually ended on a high.
Bryan Marshall: There were certainly some very good developers we worked with, such as Triumph, Sumo…
GC: All good guys who got lost in a lot of the noise. I think it's fair to point a finger squarely over at some of the North American developers we were using who weren't very good, frankly. For all our failings, we did expect them to deliver us a decent game, which they never did. But we did work with some good people who we're keen to work with again.

> "We've shown we can deliver a triple-A racing game, and compete with the best in the world with nothing like the budgets they're using"

Games like *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty* and *Clive Barker's Jericho* broadened your portfolio, and now *Bodycount* is doing the same. Are you looking to plug holes?
GC: It was probably like that when got our investment initially, and we looked at a number of holes to fill. We had strong IP and the reality is that good, strong IP is still valuable, and if you do it well you should exploit it. So we always wanted to do *Flashpoint*, and we wanted to balance that with some other good ideas. For all the failings of *Turning Point*, the basis of that game was still a good idea. So it's not that some of the ideas were bad but that our processes for getting those to market were terrible in some cases.

Which is more important in the current climate, focus or diversity?
GC: Definitely focus. All the time you play to your strengths. Taking the F1 licence wasn't just about taking an opportunity that was there: F1 were very keen that we should do it, and we've shown again and again that we can deliver a triple-A racing game, and compete with the best in the world with nothing like the budgets they're using. We need to expand a bit because we're a publisher, but we should be much more focused. *Flashpoint* was a good start – not perfect in any shape or form – but it gives us a great way to move forward for our firstperson action games.

Is there any conscious effort to preserve the culture of Codemasters?
GC: It's gone through a cultural change, if we're honest, certainly in the last six years. Brian and I were here when the Darlings were here, and there's a very different way a company works when a family's running it and when they become more corporate. It's like the death of that sort of culture. But it's not really, because we're not a huge conglomerate and it was always more about technical innovation and making the best quality products we could.
BM: I think Richard [Darling]'s attention to detail and love of simulation lives on.
GC: And [it's about] not shying away from taking things on and being clever about them. Having lived in both worlds, our culture's definitely still there, but it's embraced a lot more of the modern world as well. Really, it's all about letting the teams just innovate. There's

some great stuff coming from Birmingham that's going into *Dirt 3*, and obviously you've seen *Bodycount*. That's all Codies of old.

How about 'Britishness'? As the last of the big British publishers, do you feel any duty in that respect?
GC: I guess in today's world, every day you're dealing with people from all over the world. So it's a British company and the last bastion of British publishing, and there is some pride in that, but it doesn't take control of your life. It's about the culture we've created and making the best games you can. *Dirt 2*: brilliant game but it's all American accents, so maybe we're a little over the top with those. Maybe we should fly the flag a bit more.
BM: We should be proud, I guess. But if you look at something like *GTA*, it's all set in America yet there's a Scottish sense of humour that shines through. So hopefully that's seen in our games.

Why the rebranding of Neon to Ego?
BM: Neon was a starting place where we were trying to develop a base library that the rest of the company could use – a crossplatform foundation. But as time went on, we had to go higher to get the efficiency we needed, with higher-level tools to get the artists and designers working in a more productive manner. So Ego's a step up on that, and represents a formalisation of the tech team into the Ego development team, and almost a middleware approach to everything.

It's also more of a strategy than a piece of code; it's about the whole company working together. So if something's developed by the team in Guildford, we'll try and find the best way of getting that back into the main codebase and out to the rest of the teams. It can get complicated, but the main thing is to provide this common language and framework for all the teams, and to allow innovation to occur at the game level.

Have you considered licensing your technology to other studios?
GC: It's always a possibility, but it's not our current focus by any means. The big thing for us was when, as a company, we were all lined up for buying Renderware 4 and it obviously got taken away. So we've tried to minimise ourselves from that sort of threat in the future, and we're in a really good place.
BM: One other aspect of Ego is that we've created valuable technology IP, if you like, which was incredibly important for us when looking for further funding. When you talk to investors about technology, they understand that better than game IP, so it can't be underestimated how powerful Ego is for Codemasters.

And the next step?
BM: Our central tech team's looking at preparing for the next generational transition,

Codemasters Studios VP Gavin Cheshire (above) and chief technical officer Bryan Marshall







The Ego parade, from left: the magnificent *Colin McRae: Dirt 2*, which completed the transition to US superstardom the legendary driver himself unfortunately could not; *Fuel*, Asobo Studios' post-apocalyptic open-world racer, offering what's claimed to be the largest playable environment in a game; and the muscular and iconic *Race Driver: Grid*

whenever that may come. So we're upgrading a lot of tools and rendering libraries in need of an overhaul, and really preparing our technology so it's completely streaming-based for large worlds, because games are going that way. We're in a competitive industry so we've got to keep our costs down, so having that 2.0 strategy is really where we're headed, and that's happening now and for the foreseeable future.

It's an uncertain future, though. How much can you actually prepare for it?
BM: First you have to make your tech more modular, which we've done from day one. Part of that is making it this multi-threaded, multi-core system. We have a very good relationship with AMD, and one of the reasons for doing DX11 is that it prepares us for this multi-threaded graphics pipeline of the future. And we work with Intel on the multi-core future – not just two or three cores but many, many cores. One of the areas we need to look into more is global illumination and lighting models, because as GPUs get more powerful there'll be more ability there, and that's what'll differentiate a lot of the next-gen stuff. It's about making your tools crossplatform so you're not tied to PC, not a monolithic piece of code. Because we don't know what the next-generation platforms are. We can have a good guess, and obviously we work with Microsoft to give our feedback on where we think things are, but until it comes along we can't say.
GC: And it's not just about the box you play on, it's about the medium: how the interactivity works, how games should work between them. If anything, that's more our focus than worrying about whether there'll be a PlayStation 4 or Xbox 720. The reality is that the worst recession in living memory has made things worse for everybody, so [current-generation consoles] will probably be around a little longer because no other economics will work.

“We're throwing the thoughts away and coming out with something fresh and new. Because if you don't innovate, you're dead”

What do you think of Apple's iPad?
GC: I think it's great. Just sitting at home, browsing the web, pressing the button and it's there – brilliant.

And its gaming potential?
BM: We've dabbled in apps. We put out *F1* on iPhone and it's done OK, but there's just too many of them. You've got 100,000-odd apps out there – how do you get the exposure? It was great in the early days but now it's complicated, and it needs more thought to get people interested. And it's got free apps and paid-for apps, so already you've got the end users going, “Why is that free when *that* isn't?”
GC: The ecosystem's right, though – the straight-to-the-console nature of it.

What about PSP's future?
GC: Well, speaking as a person who bought a PSP, the problem was that I always thought, because it was a better screen than iPod's, that I'd be doing more with it. But it was such a bollocking useless waste of space; just getting stuff on it was ridiculous. That was its downfall. Relatively speaking, we didn't do too badly on *F1 PSP*. But regarding the future, I think they've got – well… no.

PSP Go's a lovely device, really smart, but our senior VP bought one the day it came out and has a great story, because he ended up on some customer support line just trying to do basic stuff. He had to re-download his software, do an immediate firmware update, and that's your user experience. Sony just hasn't got it right. Stuff like that will make people leave it alone.

Given the fate of *Dead Space Extraction*, what's your attitude towards hobbyist-focused games on Wii?
GC: Bear in mind we've had two games in the last six months which have done phenomenally well on Wii, but one was a racing game and one a cricket game. *Overlord*'s done all right but on Xbox 360 and PS3; we did it on DS as well but it just doesn't work. It just got ignored on those consoles. So it is very difficult, and to some extent the only success we've had on those brands is the big sports titles. You have to be



F1 2010 is not Codemasters' F1 debut, with entirely separate Wii title *F1 2009* already a strong performer. It's not the Codemasters debut for its Birmingham creator, either, the relationship forged by games like *Brian Lara Cricket 2005*

RPG XP

***RF Online* and *ArchLord* didn't set the world on fire, but Cheshire doesn't regret Codemasters picking them up for western release in a bid to get the company experience in the MMOG space. "We knew we were doing those games more for the experience, of supporting them and making them work," he says. "So it wasn't about making a lot of money, but setting us up so when we got *Lord Of The Rings Online* [right], we did a phenomenal job and made a fortune from it. If we could make money out of those other games then that was the plan, but the experience we've gained has been amazing. It would have been scary to cut your teeth on something like *LOTR*. That would have been awful."**



very, very selective about Wii. Everyone talks about the number of units out there, but you look and see that 70 per cent of the games sold are Nintendo's own. It's the old story: it's their console and they'll put their games on it, and you *might* do all right.

How about Natal?
GC: I'm sure there'll be games attuned to Natal and that'll be great, but what you can't do is back-engineer it into something you're currently doing. And that's where it'll fail. There are a lot of companies saying they've got Natal stuff coming, but it'll be bolted on to something they already had in development, probably. We're never going to say no, but to be fair to us we're focused on other priorities right now, and we're not big enough to just try out a few things on Natal. We're certainly looking, and we've got some great ideas, but it's how you implement them. Sony's sticks are quite good, too – they're fun, and something physical you can hold in your hand, which I prefer to just your hands in the air. But it's the same thing for software.

Codemasters has a lot of brands in its back catalogue – is there hope for them on platforms like PSN and XBLA?
GC: We have things like *Sensible Soccer* and *Cannon Fodder*, and we've tried resurrecting those before. We have some ideas, but how we do them is the issue. XBLA offers a great opportunity but you're still developing an Xbox 360 game. We resurrected *Sensi* not that long ago and it wasn't a massive success, to be honest. Everyone's moved on. We all loved *Sensi* on the Amiga but everybody remembers it that way, and it's completely different now.

EA's got a fantastic back catalogue but you don't see them resurrecting it that often. It's really hard. They dabble, but their criteria is that they've got to do two to three million units, and you're not going to do that straight away.

How about experimental modern titles?
GC: Yeah, maybe. I know we've talked about some other stuff, and there's some great stuff in the back catalogue we'd love to consider, but the big stuff just gets in the way. And you're still talking considerable development costs now, and it's a horrible thing to say but you still need a return at the end of the day.

***Race Driver: Grid* made such a complete artistic statement that it's hard to know what a sequel could add. How will it shape up? And what about *Dirt 3*?**
GC: There's an overwhelming arcing vision to all of our racing titles, and *Grid* is incredibly strong, but we're lucky enough to be in a position where we've got racing games in different areas. *Dirt* was a complete reboot – we threw away what was going on and redid it completely – and then we rebooted *Grid* because it wasn't top gun, and then we rebooted *Dirt 2*. I'm not saying we're throwing all the codebase away, but we're throwing the thoughts away and coming out with something fresh and new. Because if you don't innovate, you're dead.

What's the three-year plan, then?
GC: I think the biggest thing we'll do is the thing I can't talk to you about, but if we can pull it off it'll be utterly amazing. It will be about the medium of how we get our games to market, and we're thinking right out of the box, literally.

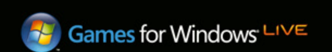






From top: RenderWare-powered Korean MMOG *ArchLord*; *RF Online*, the first MMOG Codemasters distributed; and the multiplatform *Overlord II*


18


Games for Windows LIVE

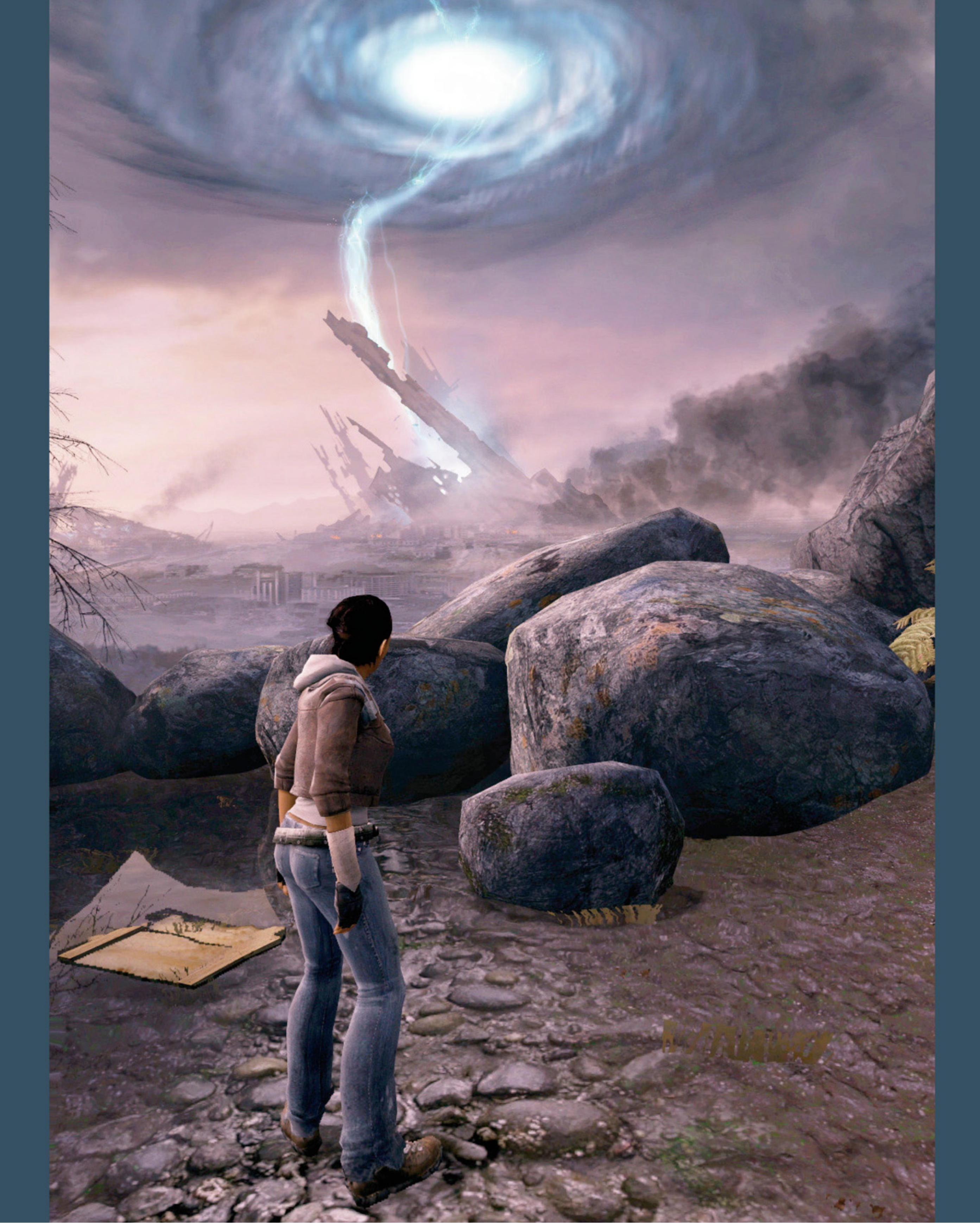



XBOX 360.


XBOX
LIVE.


PS3
PlayStation.3


PlayStation.Network



POPULAR SCIENCE

VALVE JOINS US TO LOOK IN DETAIL AT HALF-LIFE 2 – A MILESTONE IN NARRATIVE DESIGN, AND ONE OF OUR GAMES OF THE DECADE

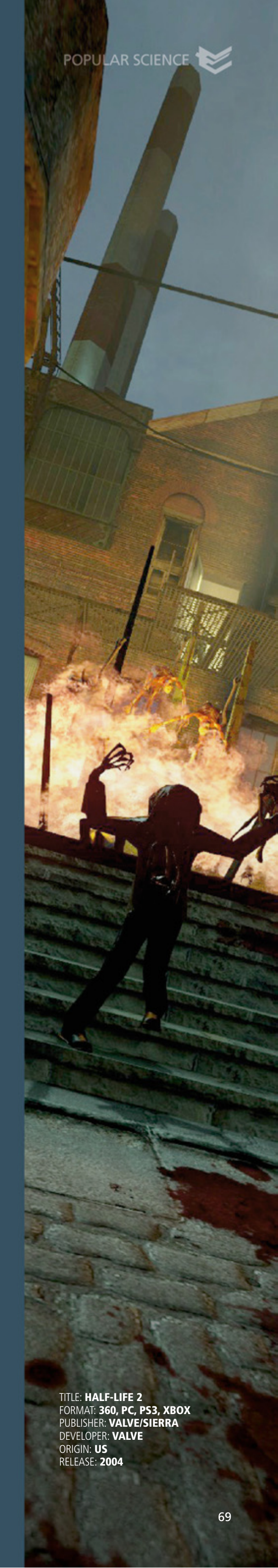
It's difficult to get anyone at Valve to tell you that *Half-Life 2* was a great game. Its staff are quick to credit their competitors with a similar will for innovation, and are reticent to posit themselves as sole pioneers. Though they acknowledge the pile of awards the game has amassed, the column inches, the forums gushing with praise, none of this is an end in itself but feedback to be analysed, fuelling the continual effort to become better at what Valve already does and loves doing.

"It helps if you don't have expectations that might make it hard to hear the reactions you are getting," says **Gabe Newell**, Valve's co-founder and figurehead, when we ask if and when he knew the company had created something special. Such evasion would normally strike you as false modesty, but Valve is a company of unorthodox methods – a company without job titles run like a school for the gifted, a company with such a close commitment to its community that it reads every email, a company that, with the slow gestation of Steam, has become something of a saviour of PC gaming with seeming reluctance. Its decisions are often unfathomable, veering from *The Orange Box*'s incredible value, through the endless care and attention given to the *Team Fortress 2* community, to the more difficult proposition of selling two *Left 4 Dead* games in quick succession. Valve is outspoken and perhaps even eccentric, Newell's own proclamations on the "total disaster" of PS3 or on Microsoft's indolent support of PC gaming provoking headlines. Externally, its catalogue may appear near-infallible – but these triumphs have been hard won. The original *Half-Life* was scrapped and revised over a period of 12 months before release. With its publisher threatening to drop marketing support shortly after the game hit shelves, Valve was not guaranteed to even recoup its investment until it persuaded Sierra to release a Game Of The Year edition.

VALVE'S TRIUMPHS HAVE BEEN HARD WON. THE ORIGINAL HALF-LIFE WAS SCRAPPED AND REVISED OVER A PERIOD OF 12 MONTHS BEFORE RELEASE

HL2's development was similarly rocky, most frequently waylaid by Valve's own towering aspirations – and perhaps this is why Newell is reluctant to sing its praises, even after the fact. Nothing is certain in game development, not even at Valve. Newell himself nixed the scheduled appearance of the game at E3 2002 when the proof-of-concept reel failed to blow him away (he had consciously distanced himself from the project in order to maintain an unbiased first viewing of it). Then the game missed its much-trumpeted September 30, 2003 ship date – a debacle which saw the company lose internal momentum as well as public face, and has solidified Newell's commitment to avoiding specific dates whenever possible. The disaster was shortly followed by a security scandal in which a German hacker leaked the not-even-nearly finished code, causing further dismay at a studio already spending $1 million per month to complete the game.

Even as the final pieces fell into place, a legal battle with publisher Vivendi Universal Games threatened to scupper Valve's efforts. Originally, Valve had sued Vivendi, claiming the publisher had illegally distributed *Counter-Strike* licences to internet cafés. Vivendi's counter-suit was the thing of nightmares: Valve had not, Vivendi alleged, been diligent in



TITLE: **HALF-LIFE 2**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **VALVE/SIERRA**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2004**

finishing *HL2*; it felt that the creation of Steam undermined its right to publish Valve's games. There were worries that Vivendi would refuse to release *HL2* until six months after it had gone gold. Vivendi relented and the courts ruled in the studio's favour – but it's proof that Valve's alchemical triumphs are the result of a little serendipity as well as perseverance and talent. It may have had the benefit of self-funding, its founders' ample reserves accumulated during the ascendency of Microsoft, but it took brass balls to see the making of *Half-Life 2* through without compromise. Perhaps this is also why so few games have managed to surpass *Half-Life 2*'s achievements. As Newell says, "Making games is hard, and every team has to pick their battles carefully."



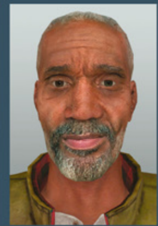
City 17 originally had a more oppressive quality to the human architecture. The eventual day-lit streets allowed for a more subtle atmosphere which drew greater contrast with the encroaching metallic Combine structures

Valve's chosen battle was simply to make the greatest PC game of all time. Its vectors of attack were multiple: skirmishes which saw the medium as a whole gain ground in the implementation of physics, develop new ways of telling stories in interactive spaces and, most fundamentally, aspire to a higher level of maturity. *Half-Life 2*'s characters are engaging both dramatically and in action: they are a tangible presence in the world which help or hinder the player directly. And the world itself, with its Eastern Bloc urban austerity and sense of abandon in its rural desolation, is a fictional construct considerably evolved from the first game's satirical shlock – a coherent place which, regardless of the player's narrow corridor of progress through it, never once fails to convince.

"There was a period when the firstperson genre was relegating the experience to that of a shooting gallery," Newell says. "There have been plenty of games that point to a much broader range of options – environment and character development, storytelling, gameplay, tone – and *HL2* was part of that."

That part being the vanguard, presumably. But it wasn't that it got there first – *Half-Life 2* isn't just an important iteration in the onward progress of the firstperson shooter, it remains a high-water mark in many respects. At the time, the presence of the handheld physics toy, the gravity gun, was thought to be the most significant addition, but, even though Valve's brilliantly playful implementation was a great differentiator from games past, the physical manipulation of the environment was an inevitability in the industry, an advance born of the unstoppable sweep of technology. The game's aspiration of communicating a grown-up narrative, through engaging with its characters and setting, was as much a product of imagination as it was technology, and it is this credential which has proved much harder for other games to match. Even *BioShock*, with its smart meta-commentary on the freedom of the player, follows a little meekly in the footsteps of *HL2*, in which your nemesis mocks your popular calling as "The Free Man" and asks if you can really do anything but destroy.

It is still, of course, a story about alien invasion, largely articulated through the exchange of gunfire. But *Half-Life 2* showed, more profoundly than other shooters of its decade, that narrative wasn't just the backdrop to action, but spawned by a constant interplay with the 3D interactive space. The germ of this sophistication was evident in the game's predecessor, from its ostentatious scene-setting on the Black Mesa transit system, to Barney the security guard offering to buy you a beer after work. Although the scientists and guards were little more than props to be sucked into air vents or diced by haywire lasers, it was easy to anthropomorphise them. The game's laboratory environments, too, despite the occasional pools of glowing green gloop and whirling hi-tech gizmos, were conceived with the trappings of credible working places. Nonetheless, the earlier game underwent a more organic process of development than its sequel, as Valve found its feet as a developer and grew its team. This did not always create the kind of wholly coherent world that would be necessary for its sequel, particularly evident in the disparity between Chuck Jones' tendrils-and-talons monster design and Ted Backman's more adult, eerie creatures. *HL2* sees Backman's sense of uncanniness now pervading the entire project – an aesthetic unity that grew out of a new approach to production.



Half-Life 2's digital actors were drawn from a variety of sources. The face of Eli Vance was discovered jobless on the street, holding a sign, while the G-Man is based on an Alexander Technique practitioner, Frank Sheldon





"There was a large-scale difference between the two projects," Newell explains. "That meant there were organisational and process changes we had to make to accommodate that. Trees are organic, but there are reasons why they don't grow to be as tall as skyscrapers."

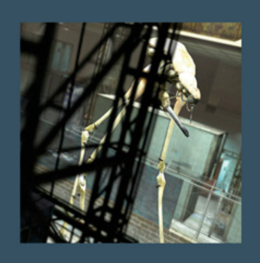
The team was broken up into cabals, each working on separate areas – but this time art was applied to the levels after their essential geometry had been laid out, with the game's writer, **Marc Laidlaw**, ducking between groups to ensure everything fitted into the overall fiction. The result was the more cohesive sense of place and tone, which was vital to the projection of *Half-Life 2*'s narrative, and which took a much darker turn than that of the original game.

"This came naturally out of the design of the world," Laidlaw says. "There was no point at which we didn't see the universe as being essentially dark. As long as we were trapped in the confines of Black Mesa, we didn't have to deal with the world beyond those walls, but that didn't mean we pictured a positive, nurturing environment. When the world of *HL2* started coming into focus, we tried to be consistent in tone – but this wasn't a matter of being selectively darker or more sophisticated. It simply meant we had to be vigilant about introducing elements that might inadvertently break the spell we were trying to cast."

There were tonal aspects of *HL*'s world that needed to be reset, however. Although Dr Kleiner and his pet headcrab provide comic relief, *HL2* is a much more consistently grim fiction, avoiding the more obvious satirical elements of *HL*'s sci-fi.

"We found that satire or parody was too limiting as a fundamental principle for creating a universe rich with possibilities," Laidlaw says.

Dr Breen, the human stooge of the oppressive Combine, could easily have been a caricatured tyrant, all monocles and Gestapo gloves – but instead his snake oil philosophy is presented in unsettlingly reasonable, measured terms. Even as Breen persuades the occupants of City 17 to reject their base instinct for procreation, his creed is never presented with tongue overtly in cheek. Equally, the casual black humour with which scientists were reduced to offal in the first game is replaced with a much sadder sense of macabre – there is little humour to be found in the cremated corpses lying in gnarled heaps beside derelict coastal buildings. The many and grisly ways in which the player is encouraged to dispatch zombies allows for grim amusement, but elsewhere the humble headcrab is used to tell poignant stories of failed resistance – and the demented wail of a zombie carrying a payload of poison headcrabs is surely one of the most chilling noises in videogames.



SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

***Half-Life 2*'s success as a game is only one part of its legacy – it was also the flagship product for Valve's Steam service, a showcase for the Source engine, and a platform for modification. Newell has always been adamant about the need for community contact, and this is best expressed through Valve's services to modders. "Being in partnership with the community is an inherent quality of interactive entertainment," Newell says. "It's not just about mods, but about every aspect of what we do." He dismisses the idea that the free release of engines like Unity3D spells the end of modding, or Valve's need to support it. Which is just as well, since it is through the use of prop-poser, physics playground and photography studio Garry's Mod that the lustrous screenshots that adorn these pages were possible, taken by Edge contributor Duncan Harris. More can be viewed online at www.deadendthrills.com**

"THERE WAS NO POINT AT WHICH WE DIDN'T SEE THE UNIVERSE AS ESSENTIALLY DARK. WE NEVER PICTURED A POSITIVE, NURTURING ENVIRONMENT"



Early on, the Combine APC could be driven by the player, but its handling didn't pass playtesting. The airboat went through revisions, too – its shortlived jet-ski incarnation proved problematic

Did Valve always intend its sequels to mature with the game's audience? Surprisingly not, according to Newell.

"That isn't something we think about except as part of each project needing to respect the fact that simply repeating the past isn't going to have the same impact now as it did then," he says. "I feel like we've gotten away from genuinely scaring the player more than I'd like, and it's something we need to think about, in addition to broadening the emotional palette we can draw on."

And now, as the future players of *Episode Three* start having families and hitting middle age, what horrifies them more than anything else? "The death of their children," says Newell. "The fading of their own abilities."



Concepts of note: Breen's office (top centre), a Combine helicopter (above left), and the mining town (below) that would later become Ravenholm

The maturity with which Valve approached its world can be seen not so much in the broad strokes of its plot but in the credible drawing of its environments – instilling a strong sense of place while compounding the game's bleak tone. Though the moonlit zombie-filled Ravenholm makes plenty of knowing nods to the horror genre, *HL2* largely resists the more obvious opportunities to deploy cliché. The bold decision to scrub early ideas for a globe-trotting plot and concentrate the action in a nonspecific eastern European country provided Valve with a fresh and idiosyncratic palette. Nonetheless, the first designs for City 17 and the surrounding wasteland saw them endure the stormy night skies of Gothic horror. The former then had the air of Blade Runner – nocturnal, rain-swept and with the dense entanglement of old and new accelerating decay. Yet the crisp sallow daylight of the final game transforms the environments into something unlike any of its inspirations. The stately plazas of the eastern European city are beset by technology which seeks to order the world as it consumes it, quite apart from Blade Runner's depiction of entropy under flickering neon lights. The towering, angular Combine structures themselves have a fascistic flavour to them – but their alarming asymmetry, impossible distribution of mass and unknowable materials, dark and iridescent, mark them out as something entirely Other.

The wasteland, too, sidestepped scorched-earth cliché and instead opted for a melancholic emptiness. The quiet wood buildings of the coast, like so many of the environments in *HL2*, hold stories that unravel as you explore, their hastily assembled possessions and broken makeshift barricades telling of the panic of the occupants' final few minutes. In cooperation with the player, the architecture of the levels themselves becomes narrator, guiding the player through little dramas that expand upon the world's fiction in bullet holes and spraypaint. Prior to *HL2*, environments had largely served as prettified backdrops: *Quake 2*'s imposing metal halls and gantries had unsurprisingly little to say about life on Stroggos. *HL2* championed a form of efficient, wordless storytelling that could only work in videogames – a medium allowing for that explorative interaction with a 3D space.

It's another boon of this mode of storytelling through the level's physical structure that you need never notice it. Though the coastal sections invite you to stop and wonder at the desolation, it's quite possible to screech through them in your buggy, bouncing from battle to battle. This is necessarily so: the game's successes elsewhere would have been for naught if it was a limp shooter. *HL2*'s mechanics may feel out of place among the more weighty, embodied shooters of more recent times, but the actual pace of the game and structure of the firefights is still brilliantly conceived. Scripting describes many of these encounters, enemies popping up to harry you during your flight to Black Mesa East, but as the tables turn the player often finds himself engaging the enemy on his own terms. These are fascinating AI encounters: the Combine soldiers





Co-founder Gabe Newell (above) and Marc Laidlaw (top). As ever at Valve, job descriptions are irrelevant, but Laidlaw commands *Half-Life 2*'s fiction

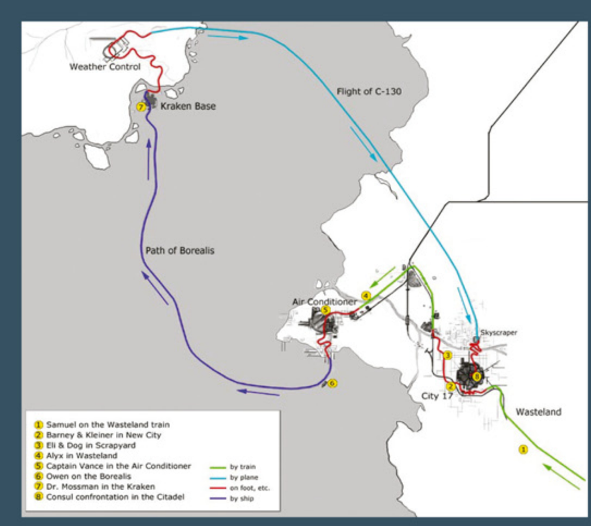
"SILENCE IS THE KEYSTONE OF GORDON. IT DOESN'T WORK FOR EVERYONE, BUT FORTUNATELY THERE ARE PLENTY OF GAMES WITH TALKING CHARACTERS"



Viktor Antonov's work is as crucial to *HL2*'s environmental design as Ted Backman's is to the game's organic elements, pushing both the setting and defining the look of Combine architecture

flank and probe your defences in ways that are credible yet defeatable. The tripodal Striders hunker down to peer under your cover and, in later episodes, acid-spitting antlions constantly shift their position around, just out of range – AI behaviour which is predictable enough to be countered by a little thought, but organic enough to never feel prescriptive or obvious, dangerous enough that each battle teeters on the limits of your control.

HL2 manages a sense of ever-increasing empowerment by creating a constant see-saw between threat and your ability to overcome it: mounting the pulse cannon on to the airboat allows you to finally deal – violently, cathartically – with the chopper that has harassed you through City 17's canals; the gravity gun transforms the zombie menace into a grisly playground full of physics-



Valve had to rein in its ambition: many planned sections were cut or merged – the 'Air Exchange' morphing into Nova Prospekt. The axed Borealis icebreaker will be repurposed for *Episode Three*

"ADVANCES IN ANIMATION, AND THE PEOPLE WE WERE LURING FROM THE FILM INDUSTRY, SPURRED US TO TRY FOR A BROADER EMOTIONAL RANGE"

enabled buzz saws and petrol canisters; the antlions go from being a lethal nuisance to your willing minions; and, of course, just when you think the game has stripped you of all your weaponry, it turns the gravity gun into a device of awesome power, able to rip the Combine consoles depicting Breen's face straight from the walls and toss them into a unit of soldiers.

The dynamism of these battles has increased as the episodes have gone on, escalating through the frantic scraps with the dog-like Hunters to the climactic defence of White Forest at the end of *Episode Two*. But Valve has always been able to manipulate the width of the linear path the player takes. Along with the convincing world-building, it's that balance of moment-to-moment freedom with the urgent motivation to keep moving that prevents it from feeling as confined and claustrophobic as other corridor shooters. Momentum is driven either from behind, by pursuing forces, or by hanging eventual goals on the horizon – making your arrival there that much more significant.

Valve's creatives are masters of understanding how drama can work in an interactive world, in a navigable 3D environment, from seeding narrative into the architecture to carefully guiding the player's eye towards details of significance. But Valve was also among the first developers to breathe life into the people who occupy the place.

"We wanted to try our hand at adding real characters to the story, rather than caricatures," Laidlaw says. "Advances in animation, and the people we were luring in from the film industry, spurred us to try for a broader emotional range."

Admittedly, Valve's approach to cutscenes has become more obtrusive as the drama it wishes to convey has grown more complex – players can opt out to a degree (Dr Kleiner's laboratory provides many distractions for those uninterested in the plight of Lamarr), but by and large you are confined while the dialogue plays out. Yet it's in your companionship with the characters outside these scenes that they grow on you the most – becoming active participants in the action. The technical advances have continued, but still only a small handful of videogame buddies are as good company as Alyx; an even smaller number of female characters in games have been as appealing (and an even smaller number aren't Caucasian). Alyx is something of a videogame Suffragette, to whose efforts the Elena Fishers of the world



FOREVER FRIENDLY

Ted Backman's creations were drawn with a keen sense of the phobias of the game's target demographic. During his job interview for Valve, Backman pitched a monster called Mr Friendly – a reptile-dog-thing with barbed tendrils intended to latch on to the player, and tug them on to a penile spike in an act of murderous copulation. As Backman explained it, the teenage audience had already seen brutes with guns for arms, but eliciting a homophobic response might be a more effective source for horror. Mr Friendly never made it into *Half-Life*, but his genetics can be seen in the Combine Advisor's phallic tendrils in *Half Life 2: Episode Two*. Indeed, Backman's influence can be felt in the body horror of all the Combine's experiments, from the inhuman radio-static burbles of its soldiers to the de-sexed, amputated Stalkers.





owe a debt. Certainly, there's a palpable frisson of love interest, but the highly capable, geeky Alyx is speaking to an entirely different audience – one for whom romantic aspirations have evolved beyond locating dad's Playboy stash. Was there ever any doubt at Valve about whether the audience was ready for a female role as something other than pixellated titillation?

"We never argued about Alyx," says Laidlaw. "In a lot of ways, the personality of the character in the game is just a refined version of our initial vision. Every discussion was about giving her more depth, more believability; we were all moving in the same direction from the start. Just as we wanted Gordon to be easily distinguishable from the typical videogame heroes of the day, we wanted Alyx to stand apart from the video-babe clichés."

While Alyx and the supporting cast have aged well, going back to *Half-Life 2* now, one of the few things that feels a little quaint is Freeman's inability to speak. Latter-day games, even shooters, either tend to impose vocalisations upon the protagonist or give the player some options for expression. But would Valve ever want *Half-Life 2*'s hero to speak?

"Gordon Freeman, whatever his strengths and weaknesses, is defined entirely by his design constraints," Laidlaw says. "Silence is the keystone of his character. I know it doesn't work for everyone, but fortunately there are plenty of games with talking protagonists. We don't have to turn *Half-Life* into one of those. That said, the 'strong, silent type' jokes are way past their expiration date. Even the very first and freshest one was slightly curdled."

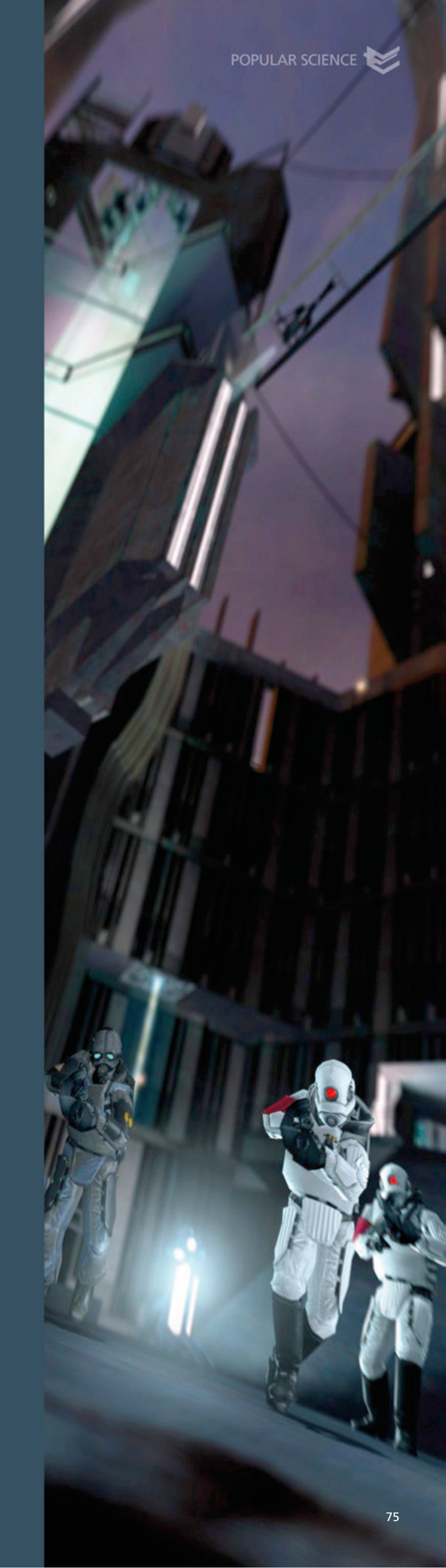
Newell seems more open to the idea. "We're not philosophically opposed to this," he says, "but we don't have good reasons to do it. Right now making your companions more interesting and compelling seems a more fruitful avenue to explore."

But Newell's less enamoured by our suggestion that Gordon might one day get a greater sense of embodiment – to become more than a floating hand and crowbar: "We haven't had a reason to change that. Most of what I've seen to date has been gimmicky and is entertaining for just a minute or so."

Despite such assurances to the contrary, we wonder if Valve's dogmatic insistence on producing episodes, rather than an outright sequel, has left it strapped to conventions that it would rather leave behind. But even if it resists any mechanical change for the upcoming *Episode Three*, the series will still stand as the high point of what the firstperson shooter has achieved in terms of narrative and world-building, its aftershocks still rattling through any game that attempts to tell a story within a 3D space. But it's more than understanding how to use the medium: when we look back and smirk at how gaming's early days were bootstrapped by puerile fantasy and thoughtless violence, when the firstperson shooter finally involves considerably more than just shooting, it will be *Half-Life 2* to which everyone owes the debt.



City 17 was grown much like a real eastern European city – building up from 19th century architecture, through the architectural intrusions of the 20th century, and finally stamping it on top with the harsh Combine identity




START YOUR REVENGE
18
www.pegi.info
"", "PlayStation", "PLAYSTATION", "PS3" and "ΔΟΧ□" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. "SONY" and "" are registered trademarks of Sony Corporation "make.believe" is a trademark of the same company. "Blu-ray Disc" and "BD" are trademarks. God of War III ©2010 Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. Published by Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. Developed by Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. "God of War" is a trademark or a registered trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. All rights reserved. *Broadband internet service required. Users are responsible for broadband access fees. Charges apply for some content. PlayStation®Network and PlayStation®Store subject to terms of use and not available in all countries and languages. Users under 18 require parental consent.
THE GAME IS JUST THE START.
WHEN THE GODS BETRAYED YOU, THEY TOOK EVERYTHING YOU HAD. NOW IT'S TIME TO TAKE IT BACK. START TAKING THEIR LIVES, START TAKING THEIR POWERS AND START TAKING THEM DOWN, ONE GOD AT A TIME. GOD OF WAR 3, THE EPIC, BONE-SHREDDING CONCLUSION TO THE TRILOGY. START YOUR RAGE. START YOUR REVENGE.
GODOFWARGAME.COM/COMPETITION
GOD OF WAR III
PS3
PlayStation 3


SONY
make.believe



ACTIVISION
classic games
FIFA 2000
PlayStation
NINJA REFLEX
CIRCUS
PLAYGROUND
ROCK BAND 2
INFERNO
CRICKET 07
GUITAR HERO
MEDIEVAL TOTAL WAR
RED DEAD REDEMPTION
MAX PAYNE



THE MONEY GAME

REMEMBER WHEN GAME COMPANIES WERE INVESTORS' DARLINGS? NOW, THE UK HAS NO LISTED PUBLISHER OR DEVELOPER. WHAT HAPPENED?

Every decade or so, the stock market enters the public consciousness. In the 1980s it was all about the yuppies and Gordon 'greed is good' Gecko from the movie Wall Street. In the 1990s, it was dotcom moguls and their overnight millions who inspired some and infuriated others. On April 23, Charlie Sheen will be back on cinema screens as Bud Fox in Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps. Bad news sells, and the financial world has never made headlines like those of the past 18 months, as reckless banking brought the financial system to its knees. It was the trading of complex debts and other obligations rather than company shares that sparked this latest debacle, but after the crash that followed, nobody can now be ignorant of how the capital markets can impact our lives.

Despite showing signs of recovery in late 2009, the FTSE 100 still ended the '00s far below where it began. So much for long-term investing: the value of your investment can indeed go down as well as up. Stock market cycles are not only about market-wide crashes. Game companies too have been through a boom and bust-up affair with the markets, particularly in the UK.

Back in 1996, the London Stock Exchange boasted 15 companies that made some or all of their money through games. Today, just one – Game Group, the retailer – does, after hype puffed up the whole sector before profit warnings, bankruptcies, takeovers and exasperation did for it. And it's been a similar story across Europe.

Globally, the picture is more mixed. In the US and Japan, many listed companies have survived and a handful even thrived over the past decade. But there have also been high-profile failures and cheap takeovers, and the share prices of even the strongest companies are well off their highs.

The depressed stock market in 2008 and early 2009 is one reason for the poor performance of the game companies that have survived, but perhaps more important are worries over the traditional boxed game model that has sustained the industry since the mid-'90s.

SHAREWARE: TAKE-TWO

Source: **Google Finance** Ticker: **TTWO** Market cap: **$836 million**

***Grand Theft Auto* owner and publisher Take-Two Interactive saw its share price leap and decline during 2008 on an aborted EA bid, and the volatility continued in 2009**

$14
$12
$10
$8
$6
Jan 09 Feb 09 Mar 09 Apr 09 May 09 Jun 09 Jul 09 Aug 09 Sep 09 Oct 09 Nov 09 Dec 09 Jan 10

"GAMES DEVELOPERS ARE HARD TO MAKE CONSISTENT EARNERS – THE BUSINESS IS SIMPLY TOO CREATIVE FOR THAT. IT'S ALSO A LOW MARGIN BUSINESS IN A VERY COMPETITIVE MARKET"

"The market fears that the console cycle is over, never to return," says **Michael Pachter**, managing director of equity research at Wedbush Morgan Securities. "The industry appears broken, with costs rising and revenues falling. It will take a few consecutive months of growth before investor confidence returns."

Nick Gibson, founder of Games Investor Consulting and a veteran of the interface between games and private capital, echoes this point. But when it comes to the longer-term history of listed game companies – which seems to stand at odds with gaming's post-PlayStation growth – he is more sanguine: "Firstly, not all companies succeed in capitalising on a booming industry, and even some of the largest publishers have suffered losses as a result of strategic missteps, overweight cost bases, poor product launches and so on. Secondly, during the last two industry cycles, games sector investors in the United States have become increasingly knowledgeable about industry dynamics, and this has led to some investors timing their investment decision ahead of anticipated cyclical upturns and downturns, rather than in reaction to these events."

Gibson and Pachter are likely correct that investors are behaving rationally in their judgement of the outlook and value of videogame companies, given the age of the current consoles, the plateauing of game sales and the uncertainty over what's next from Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo. Yet the question remains: why has an industry that's grown 'bigger than Hollywood', as the cliché goes, often fared so badly as an investment?

Let's first consider why a company would want to be listed on a stock market. After all, it's not a condition of doing business. Plenty of companies (including those surviving independent game developers) are privately as opposed to publicly owned concerns.

First, by floating, the founders or investors can realise some of the value in the business – they can cash-out. There are other ways to do this, such as selling their company to another business (a

"I HATED EVERY SECOND"

Jez San, who floated and ran Argonaut – before its demise in 2004 the UK's biggest and most high-profile publicly listed game developer – reflects on why he now believes going public was a bad move:

"I hated almost every second of being a public game developer. I'm not put off being a public company – just of being a public game developer. The business model and the expectations of the City just don't align.

"You sell your soul to the devil to raise lots of cash. They expect you to invest their cash in developments that will maximise profit. To do that, they expect you to improve your margins and make big rewards, and that requires spending the cash they've just given you investing in big projects that have the potential to do big business. They're 'make or break' gambles.

"They want you to stop doing ports and movie licences and start creating new IPs that the company will own because it hasn't done a deal too early. They want you to take the game to near completion before trying to license it to a publisher or distributor for a higher amount – later in the cycle – than if the publisher had financed the game earlier. They want the developer to hang on to IP rights and not give them away to the publisher.

"The problem is that with big rewards come big risks. What if the publishers don't want your game, or don't have a spare slot or spare marketing cash sloshing around? What if the game takes longer to make and costs us more? What if after all the extra risk we take, they just offer us the same vanilla deal that we could've got if we signed up early in the cycle?

"Ultimately the big deal about going public that helps is that you get given a large influx of cash. That's the good bit. The bad bit is that every second after you've taken the devil's cash you are expected to use it wisely and report back to them on every move you make.

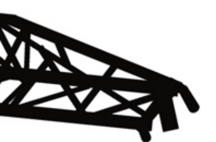
"There's no secrecy once you're public. Every deal and almost every conversation you have with almost any publisher must be reported. Every day of slippage must be disclosed. And if a game doesn't sell as well as expected – or, hell, even sells better than expected – it must all be disclosed quarterly. There are no trade secrets.

"So I personally believe now – with hindsight – that as a game developer it's a difficult move being a public company. It



doesn't sit well with the business model of a game developer. The deals and revenue are lumpy – infrequent hits of large amounts don't allow you to report the smooth revenue that the City is looking for, and any slippage from one quarter into another is a massive revenue shift. And they punish you badly for it."






Ian Baverstock, Kuju


Ian Livingstone, Eidos

trade sale), offering a stake to a fund or a wealthy individual, or even paying out more profits to owners as dividends. But a flotation is often considered the best route for larger companies.

One reason is of course if the owners think they'll achieve a higher valuation by floating. Another is that listing gives ready access to further funding in the future.

Growing companies that need more money can either borrow it or they can sell off a portion of the business and future profits to investors. The latter avenue – achieved by creating and selling shares in the company – may be more expensive in the long-term, but it's less risky than the burden of debt, assuming a loan is even available. Once listed, companies can then easily raise cash by issuing more shares at the prevailing share price.

In a sometimes lucrative and fragmented industry like videogames, having such easy access to funding is attractive because it makes it much easier to acquire another studio or publisher. Listed companies can sometimes even pay for an acquisition with shares alone, skipping the money-raising step.

"Eidos came to the market in 1995 and succeeded thanks only to the City," recalls **Ian Livingstone**, who was chairman of Eidos throughout the late-'90s boom years. "We went for a full listing on the London Stock Exchange and got the issue away, giving the company the necessary working capital to build a business. Not only that, we went back to the market less than six months later for more funds to acquire Centregold, the only other games company listed on the main London market. And with Centregold came Core Design. And with Core came a young adventuress in the making.

"A few months later, in November 1996, Eidos launched *Tomb Raider* starring the wonderful Lara Croft and went on to sell over seven million copies of that classic first title. Lara Croft became a massmarket entertainment property – the symbol of 'Cool Britannia' – and Eidos became the darling of the City."

Lara Croft helped to put games on the City boys' radar. What had seemed a nerdy hobby was revealed to be capable of creating global blockbusters on the scale of the biggest movies.

The new appetite for game companies even encouraged veteran British developers such as Codemasters and Climax to explore a flotation, although neither ultimately made the leap.

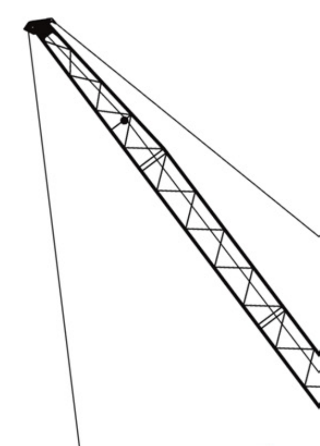
The trouble is, a stock market listing brings extra complications that arguably damage the game-making process, and perhaps too the profitability of investing in game developers.

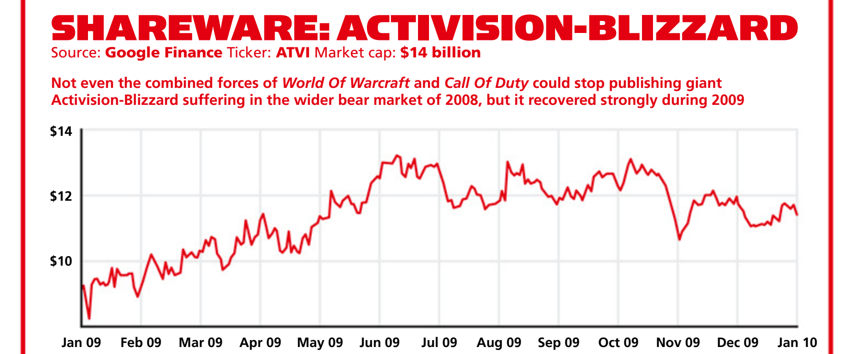
Notably, all of today's major listed game companies are publishers (albeit with internal development), though that's not to say that publishers have always proved good investments. Eidos was snapped up by Square Enix at what seemed like a bargain price, for instance, and the likes of Midway in the US and Infogrames in France eventually floundered.

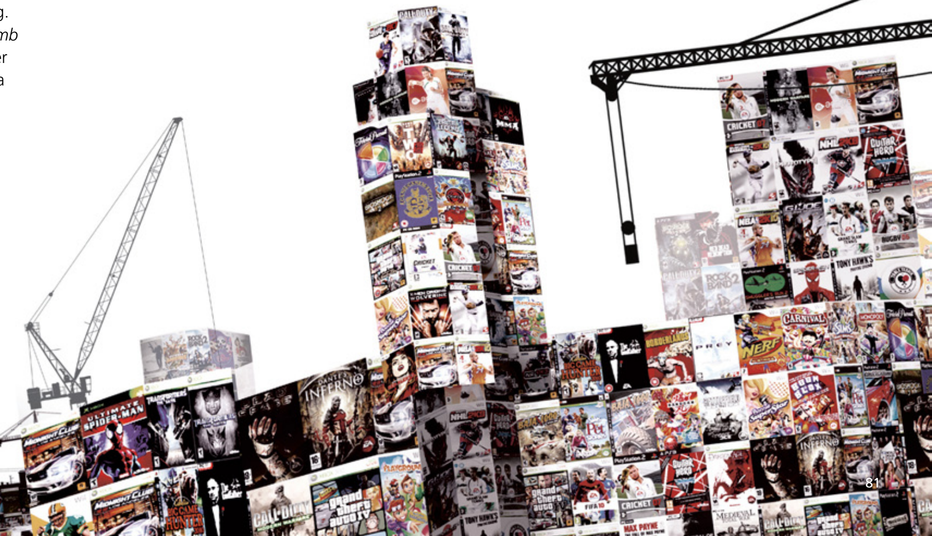
But other giants like Electronic Arts and Activision-Blizzard in the US, Ubisoft in France, and Konami, Namco Bandai and Square Enix in Japan together comprise a multi-billion-dollar game sector. In total, the US and Japanese stock markets house 41 listed game companies between them, many of which have been listed for over a decade.

"These are mature markets that have attracted a plethora of financial analysts, and a large number of institutional investors who understand the industry," Gibson says. "This has resulted in a healthy ecosystem with a good flow of information from and about the games companies, combined with widespread support from the investor base."

Jez San, who floated his now-defunct UK game studio Argonaut but wouldn't float a developer again (see "I hated every second"), agrees that with a large catalogue and healthy release schedule, it makes "perfect sense" for a publisher to go for a public listing, as opposed to a game developer.









He argues that being a game publisher is analogous to being a banker – you invest X in the developers, Y in the marketing, and you generate Z in revenues as a reward: "Nice, easy calculations. If you have a fat enough release pipeline, you should be able to keep the revenues smooth, and cover any misses and slips with overages of other games doing better than expected."

This is clearly a very different world to game development. A large publisher with 30 games in development may be taking a big creative risk with each project, but the odds are balanced because it's backed so many horses. In contrast, even the largest triple-A game studios have only a few titles in production, and single titles can take years to finish. In the meantime, as well as the risk of making a poor game or missing milestones, developers are at risk of not being paid by the publisher, and of crippling wage bills accrued during the delays in the process of signing new projects.

"The public markets find valuing games developers almost impossible – they tend to work off of earnings multiples and also value consistency of profitability," explains **Ian Baverstock**, CEO of Kuju Entertainment, who floated his studio on the UK market in 2002 before its acquisition by a German group in 2006. "Games developers are hard to make consistent earners – the business is simply too creative for that. Development is also a low margin service business in a very competitive market.

"The real value of a developer is its ability to either create a new IP or to make a publisher a large margin on a successful title. That's why some developers see very high values on acquisition. But these simply aren't valuation methodologies that ordinary investment companies can use."

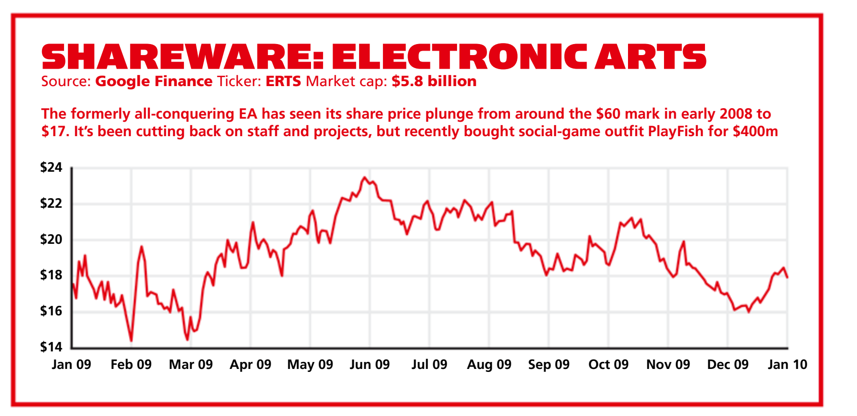
"Nobody can claim that it is easy to 'get' games," agrees Livingstone. "However, I believe that private capital has made great progress in recent years to understand the complexities and opportunities of the games industry."

Livingstone points out that today there are a multitude of game-enabled devices, platforms, online and offline experiences, games being delivered as a service as well as a product, new technologies and myriad business models including free-to-play.

"Add to that cyclicality, seasonality, escalating costs, global competition, problems of lack of scale and there are plenty of reasons for investments to go wrong in a hurry," he says.

"Despite the huge growth of the market and incredible revenue generation by many titles, the industry is littered with failure and closures," Livingstone continues. "Whilst some say that private capital does not 'get' games – and I'm not one of them – I sometimes wonder if all games companies 'get' private capital."

Pachter offers another view: "The market has historically valued these companies as tech companies, when in fact they are packaged goods companies. I think that valuations were way too high for the last ten years, but that they are way too low now. The companies should be valued based upon their earnings power, which is higher than the market as a whole."



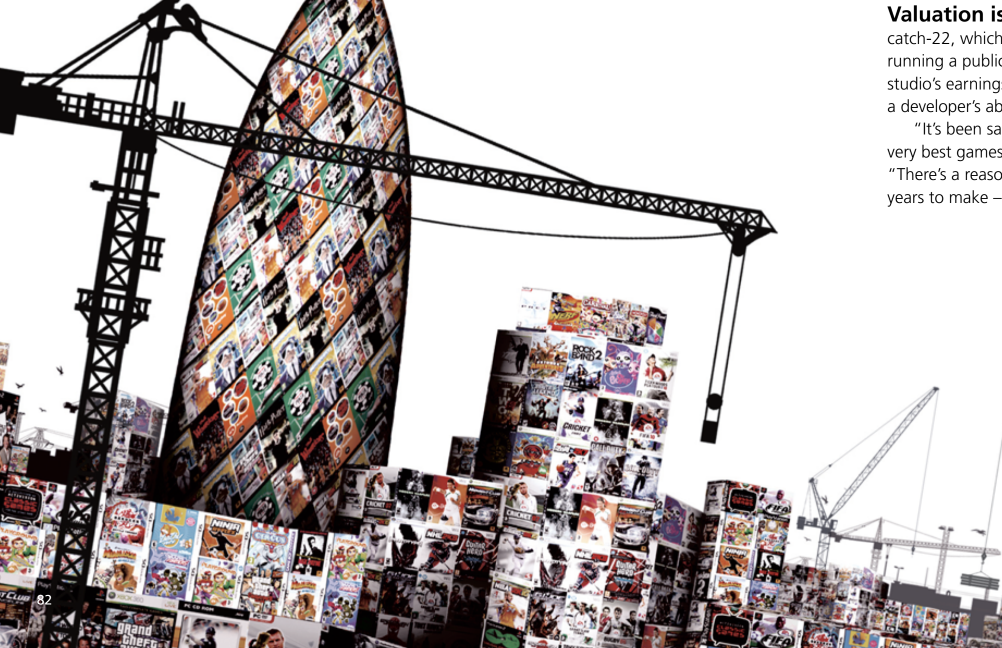
SHAREWARE: ELECTRONIC ARTS

Source: **Google Finance** Ticker: **ERTS** Market cap: **$5.8 billion**

The formerly all-conquering EA has seen its share price plunge from around the $60 mark in early 2008 to $17. It's been cutting back on staff and projects, but recently bought social-game outfit PlayFish for $400m

Valuation is one thing, but for developers there's also a catch-22, which is that ongoing costs and responsibilities of running a publicly listed company – and the susceptibility of a studio's earnings to release schedule movements – can damage a developer's ability to create good, profitable games.

"It's been said by many of the best game developers that the very best games were not built to a schedule," San points out. "There's a reason some of Peter Molyneux's best games took four years to make – they were two-year projects that had an extra two









Nick Gibson, Games Investor Consulting

Karl Jeffrey, Climax

It seems likely, though, that any new money raised – assuming the venture capital taps do eventually open up again after the travails of the past couple of years saw their investments dry up – will mainly go towards social, casual or multiplayer ventures, or to bolster the war chests of game publishers.

"I think games need to be much more routinely funded by non-publisher and non-equity finance, and that requires the same sort of specialist project financing that is available to movies," says Baverstock. "It would enable the publishers to get a much better return on their capital and would also open up new investment structures for developers, too."

"LISTED GAMES COMPANIES WORLDWIDE HAVE RAISED OVER $6 BILLION IN NEW FINANCE SINCE 2000, WHILST PRIVATELY HELD COMPANIES HAVE RAISED WELL OVER $2 BILLION"

years spent on them. As a public company, you don't have the luxury of infinite tweaking time. You just can't afford it. Quarterly reporting means constant delivery – and nothing can be late."

Clearly, public ownership forces some difficult decisions, although Pachter argues that it equally attracts more professional management, and that there are few private game companies that are productive year in and year out: "Yes, companies like Valve, id Software and Bethesda put out extremely high quality games, but it is not clear that they are maximising their potential, and if they were publicly held, my guess is that they would be even more productive."

While the UK's listed game sector has been through the equivalent of the meteor strike that did for the dinosaurs, this certainly hasn't killed off UK game development. From Lionhead to Realtime Worlds, Jagex to Rockstar North, there are plenty of both publisher-owned and independent developers still making top-class games throughout Britain.

"Broaden the perspective to include casual and social games on browser and smartphones and it is clear that UK games companies are doing OK," agrees **Karl Jeffrey**, founder and CEO of Climax. "Although many companies have gone to the wall, that is just the Darwinian nature of business."

The ongoing listed game sector in the US and Japan has also ensured new investment has continued to enter the game industry – some of which was doubtless funnelled to the UK – and Gibson believes that this money has ultimately benefited the games we've played. "Listed games companies worldwide have raised over $6 billion in new finance since 2000, whilst privately held companies have raised well over $2 billion," he says. "The majority of this money has ended up in product development, research and innovation. Without this money, the games landscape would undoubtedly look very different."

After the experiences of the past 15 years, we're certainly very unlikely to ever see another wave of UK game studios coming to the market to join lonely Game Group in representing the industry in the City of London. And perhaps this is no bad thing.

"I am very glad we didn't list Climax now," reflects Jeffrey. "There is an inherent tension between the short-term view of capital markets and the long-term nature of game development. Budding games industry entrepreneurs need to understand that an IPO is not an exit, and for value maximisation a trade sale is generally the best plan."

STOCK PHRASES

A simple guide to some of the terms employed in the world of investment

IPO
A company joins the stock market via an Initial Public Offering – also known as a flotation – which enables investors to buy shares.

Ticker
A company's code on a stock exchange. For example, Electronic Arts' ticker on the US NASDAQ exchange is ERTS, while The Game Group on the London Stock Exchange is GMG.

Margin
A company's profits divided by its sales, expressed as a percentage.

Earnings
The profit made over a period. Companies report both their total earnings and how much is attributable to each share, known as earnings per share.

Quarter
A three-month period over which a company prepares a snapshot of its activities. Some UK companies report on a half-yearly basis, but American companies report quarterly. Game developers often complain that their projects are rushed by publishers so that sales will boost a particular quarter.

Dividend per share
Many companies pay out a proportion of their earnings to shareholders via a cash dividend. The dividend per share is the cash you get for each share you own.

Net cash/net debt
The cash in the bank/the cash owed by the company, after taking into account all retained profits and outstanding loans.

Dividend yield
The dividend per share divided by the share price, expressed as a percentage. It indicates the annual cash return from investing in a company, akin to an interest rate at a bank.

P/E ratio
The market capitalisation divided by the earnings (or the share price divided by the earnings per share). Bargain hunters like low P/E ratios, which may indicate that a company is cheap. High P/E ratios mean investors expect the company's earnings to grow relatively quickly.

Market capitalisation
The value of the company, calculated by multiplying the total number of shares in an issue by the current share price.

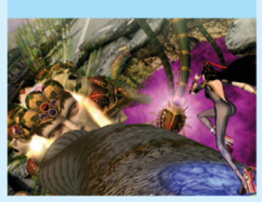



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

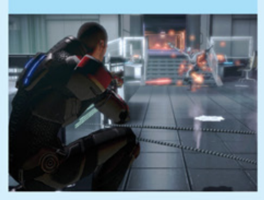
Edge's most played

Bayonetta



It really isn't funny how good you can get at this game. It's hilarious. Angel Slayer's our latest timesink, and tempting all sorts of weird weapon/accessory combinations.
360, PS3, SEGA

Mass Effect 2



Having saved the galaxy once as a goody-two-shoes golden boy, we decided it was high time a ruthless ice queen was let loose upon the unsuspecting cosmos. Mwa-ha-ha.
360, PC, EA

Neptune's Pride



Don't tell anyone we told you, but A and C have you in a pincer movement, and D's giving them the tech you gave him. Send us some Range research; we'll help. Honest.
ONLINE, IRON HELMET

Fantasy versus reality

Striking visual shifts really stand out



There's a whiff of The Spirits Within about *FFXIII*'s long cutscenes, and it's another of those games with an abundance of them. Sometimes, one will end and let you walk five steps only for another to kick off. At least it gives Square Enix's artists plenty of room to show what they can do

Any type of fiction can live or die by its coherence. If the plot contradicts itself, or too many MacGuffins come into play, the audience will pick it apart. The same holds for visual quality: one of the most common criticisms of *Final Fantasy VII* was that the look of its cutscenes strayed too far from the realtime polygonal character models for the two styles to credibly coexist. As *FFVII*'s reputation demonstrates, however, it's possible to get away with it.

Final Fantasy XIII features some of the most incredible visuals ever seen in a game, especially in the form of cutscenes. One, which sees the party and their summoned allies invade an *F-Zero*-style race, features moments of photorealism, as well as a total lack of narrative context. It appears to be the sequence for which the ability to ride summons was invented, and lasts for more minutes on end of confusing but spectacular action. Once it concludes, though, you're dumped into a realtime battle, and the distinction between visual styles hits home, making a great combat system feel somewhat archaic.

It's not the only time this happens, because *FFXIII*'s visual makeup doesn't consist of only two distinct visual styles. There are cutscenes that look like they were rendered some years ago, and others that must date from the final stretch of the game's long development process. In some sequences the characters in your party feature details such as pores and individual hairs, while in others they have waxy skin and tresses animated in basic sections. In one scene there's a distinct stiffness in a character's turning motion, and in the next a facial tic of such understated eloquence that it takes the breath away.

What does it all add up to? A game in which fantasy consistently crashes against reality. *FFXIII*'s realtime 3D engine is certainly capable of conjuring up some wonderful sights, but when such delights are so frequently thrown against non-interactive segments of varying visual quality it can't help but feel incongruous.

Developing a game of *FFXIII*'s scale isn't simply a matter of letting loose armies of artists; it's much more complicated than that. When spinning a yarn is at the heart of the experience, the process of preventing the spell from breaking is even trickier.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



FINAL FANTASY XIII

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E201





Cocoon is a stunning environment, although everything always remains just out of reach. Pulse (below) is more open, with a fine sense of scale









Square Enix has a talent for giving even generic settings a distinctive identity. The range of environments is wide, but as you're often being shuttled through you can blink and miss more than a few

It's all in the name. The 13th main instalment of a series that has relentlessly spawned subsidiaries over the past decade, the distinguishing factor is in those words as a title, rather than a brand. A true *Final Fantasy* – only the second since 2002 – is still an event.

This time around, it's also a big reveal. *Final Fantasy XIII* changes the basic formula of the series radically – to an extent that no pre-release talk hinted at – and strikes out on its own. Even the most basic assumptions about what a *Final Fantasy* game should be are left at the door: this can barely be described as a roleplaying game. You won't come across a single town worthy of the label, talk to shopkeepers or be swept into an intricate minigame. Your characters don't even level up for the first few hours.

It's best to get the beginning out of the way: it's a disaster of pacing that both bores and condescends to the player. There's an excellently rendered cutscene to start off, and for the next two hours you'll do little but run forward through walled-in environments and press a single button over and over to dismiss enemies. By the time you encounter anything approaching a challenge, *FFXIII* is stirring one emotion in particular: boredom.

> If you submit 25 hours to a misjudged series of linear battles and cutscenes, Square Enix lets you play FFXIII, and you'll get 25 decent hours out of it

The combat system is the culprit. Square Enix has constructed a masterpiece within the structure of turn-based battling, but the game is scared of you getting it wrong. While the system is complex, it's not too hard to get to grips with the basics, but you won't have access to the full capabilities of your party until around 20 hours in. It introduces every element at a crawling pace, and seems to think the only way players learn is through repetition – you'll get a new tactic and then have to barrel through a series of identical enemies that are defeated by spamming it.

When your party is finally operating at full capacity, there's still more of the linear story to trudge through – and it is a trudge. The game's producers have gone on record as saying that western audiences don't understand this first section, but in fact we do: it's just a bit rubbish. The first 25 hours of the game are one long corridor of palette-swapped enemies, fights that never quite find the right level of challenge, and cutscene after cutscene (after cutscene) leaving your joypad entirely idle.

The little blue circle means characters can jump from that point. While they often see you do a neat flip or similar, they're little more than A-to-B hotspots

Then it all goes right. Your party decamps to Pulse, a sprawling, slightly-more-open world beneath Cocoon, and the real *FFXIII* begins to emerge. It's that combat system. You directly control the party leader, with two support characters fighting automatically, but you can also control their roles: there are damage dealers, tanks, medics and so on. Any combination can be pre-arranged, and up to six can be swapped between on the fly when in battle. The scope for customising your loadout doesn't initially seem overwhelming, but it quickly becomes clear what a difference a change makes, and how small a number six really is.

The enemies span the full gamut: hulking, nimble, pack-hunters, solo attackers, magic-based, physical brutes, immune to some things and weak to others. Each also has a 'Stagger' bar, separate from their health. Fill this to the top, and damage is doubled while new offensive options become available. Your role is management. Use Evened Odds to heal your wounds, bulk up and soften your enemy (with a party of Saboteur, Medic and Synergist). Switch to Tri-Attack to fill their Stagger meter quickly (all Ravagers). Switch to Hero's Charge to maintain the level of Stagger while healing any damage done in the meantime and







Battle animations are excellent, but not exactly plentiful. You'll be seeing each one literally thousands of times, so it's a pity that there isn't a little more variety. That doesn't stop the representation of what's going on occasionally taking the breath away, though, and you can't say that about many RPGs







This beast (left) mistakenly believes it's in for an easy meal. Enemies wander around the overworld and will engage you when you enter their range. You can be sneaky, however, and creep up behind them to give yourself a pre-emptive strike, which lets you stagger them almost immediately as the fight begins

adding new buffs to your party (Commando, Synergist, Medic). Another Tri-Attack and, despite resistance, they're staggered – unleash Endless Assault (Commando, Commando, Medic), launch them in the air and begin dealing out the big blows. They don't touch the ground for the next 30 seconds, and by the time they're down, they're out.

Things don't always go so smoothly. You'll often find yourself in desperate rearguard actions, using Salvation (all Medics) just to stay alive and wait for a respite, when you can squeak out a few boosts and attacks before hunkering back down. The possibilities in your party are so dynamic that the enemies have to be deadly, capable of killing you in a few quick hits, to force you on to the back foot. If you're not alive to the flow of combat, you'll quickly find that your party leader has been downed. It's a system as capable of playing rope-a-dope as it is delivering a knockout blow, and the fact that those Active Time Battle gauges still anchor it is nothing short of remarkable.

For around 20 hours after your arrival on Pulse, *FFXIII* hits a sweet spot, the relentless pull of the narrative dissipated over hunting side-quests and the simple joy of exploring to see what visual marvel is around the next corner. There are definite issues with the way in which *FFXIII* switches between visual styles (see p85), but when you're in-game and wandering around this remarkable world, they're just background static. Cocoon is an inspired setting, its blend of high technology and sky-spanning architecture blessed with a vibrancy and vivid colour that often leaves you open-mouthed. Pulse, though more traditional in its savage-land stylings, still manages to be awesome through the sheer scale of the place, beasts the size of buses idly grazing as feral cats attack a behemoth.

It's a significant prop to a story that has moments of poignancy and a few good characters, but ultimately falls flat. This is such a well-realised world that to have it inhabited by *Final Fantasy* clichés is especially disappointing. Hope (really) is a kid tormented by the death of his mother. Vanille's an over-sexualised nonentity. Sazh is a convincing argument against Danny Glover and Lionel Richie ever again being combined into a single character. The biggest problem is that there's simply no one else. Outside of the main party, every single character in this game is either a cackling cipher, a bystander with a few repeated lines, or a deus ex machina who's there and gone within the space of a cutscene.

Some people don't like numbers, but try this little sum. If you submit 25 hours of your life to a misjudged series of linear battles and cutscenes, Square Enix lets you play *FFXIII*, and you'll get 25 decent hours out of it. It's an equation that might just balance out – but for who? Well, the fanbase, certainly, will find Lightning to be the Cloud substitute they've been yearning for, and in the hunting side-quests the grinding fix they're after. For anyone less dedicated – who wouldn't really care if a Chocobo makes an appearance or not – it's more troubling. *FFXIII* is uncommonly beautiful, with a background fiction as rich as its story is poor, and at its beating heart is a battle system that stands among the genre's finest. Its structural changes are brave, but in minimising everything that happens outside of that main narrative the baby's been thrown out with the bathwater, leaving a potentially interesting world that you just don't care about saving.

FFXIII takes brave risks with the series' foundations, but they ultimately create trembling fractures throughout the entire edifice, that robust battle system unable to support the weight of an entire world. *Final Fantasy* games are always an investment. This time, the returns are questionable. **[5]**

Class act

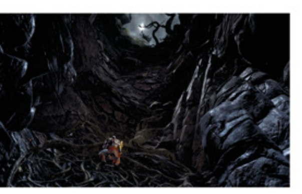


Characters can be one of six classes: a Commando, damage-dealing; a Ravager, quickfire user of offensive magic; a Saboteur, inflicting status ailments; a Synergist, boosting your party's capabilities; a Sentinel, attracting enemy attacks and guarding; or a Medic. Each character can develop in any class after a certain point in the game, but each has its own affinities that render this largely redundant. Levelling is handled through the Crystarium, an elaborate series of interlinked orbs that give you, for example, +100 HP for 2,000 crystal points. There are new abilities dotted around, the odd bonus accessory slot, and that's your lot. It's nice enough, and well presented, but we don't think it's a patch on *FFXII*'s levelling system.

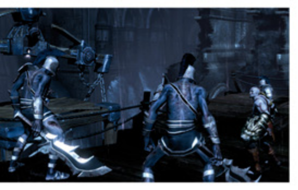


GOD OF WAR 3

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCE **DEVELOPER:** SCE SANTA MONICA
PREVIOUSLY IN: E207





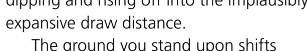


In a nod to *Heavenly Sword*, the choice of weapon now affects the speed and efficiency of Kratos' evasive manoeuvres. Equipped with the Cestus, a pair of giant metal fists, you can only bob out of the way of an incoming attack, while with the Claws of Hades you can roll at speed from danger. Choose your weapon wisely



As cross-generational game series are forced to expand their ambition to meet the ever-widening boundaries of hardware, so the strengths and weaknesses of their original blueprints are accentuated. Not only that, but their makers' core priorities are made clearer, either through increasingly complex systems or ever more ambitious visuals. *God Of War* has always prized spectacle over mechanical fussiness, a focus never sharper than in this, the series' debut on a contemporary console. And it's spectacular, expressing its narrow take on ancient mythological brutality in the grandest terms yet seen.

The introductory sequence, picking up from the hanging conclusion of the second title in the trilogy, sets the pace and scale. Kratos, the jaundiced Spartan war god who sweats revenge from every pore, races around the arms and torso of the Earth goddess Gaia as she scales Mount Olympus in search of Zeus. The vision is uncompromising, the camera wheeling and diving around the action, catching throwaway glimpses of a mountain range dipping and rising off into the implausibly expansive draw distance.

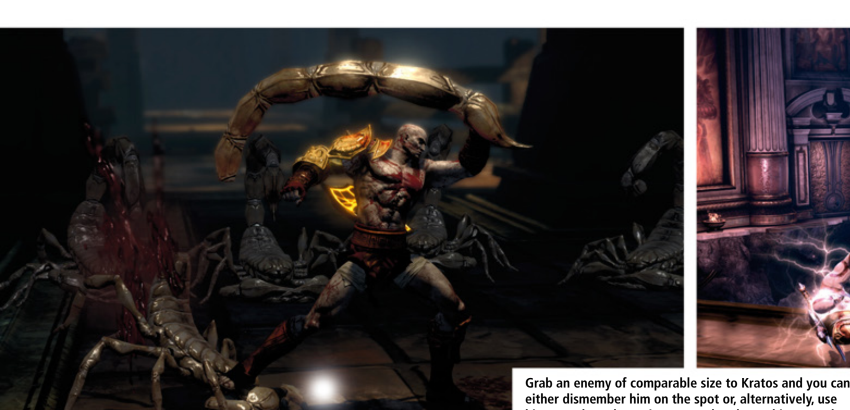


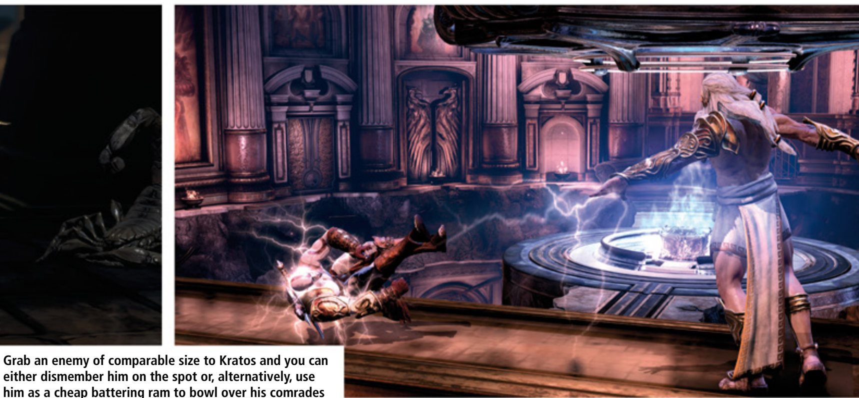
The ground you stand upon shifts perpendicular to the horizon and back again as Gaia clambers upwards, and with it so the obstacles and cover around you change form and value. All the while Gaia is set upon by Poseidon who, in the form of a giant water scorpion, acts as a calling card for Santa Monica's foremost animators and 3D artists. It's a clear two-finger watery salute to those who would doubt the possibility of such a sequence, a showboating flourish by a developer in complete control of its chosen approach and hardware. Gaia is the primary focus of Poseidon's fury, not Kratos, a distinction that casts the player in the role of a parasite, albeit one upon whose actions the life or death of its host depends. These echoes of *Shadow Of The Colossus* inform the entire experience, which is strewn with towering gods and monsters.



God Of War has always prized spectacle over mechanical fussiness, a focus never sharper than in the series' debut on a contemporary console

Which is not to say that Kratos fails to match up to his opponents. But in the hands, *God Of War 3* feels less like an expansion of what has gone before and more of a continuation. Two basic attacks – light and heavy – can be strung together into combos as you bat away various creatures of myth. As you progress, Kratos gains new weapons and the potential for seamless mid-combo weapon switching makes elaborate and exciting strings of attacks as straightforward as they are mesmerising.





Grab an enemy of comparable size to Kratos and you can either dismember him on the spot or, alternatively, use him as a cheap battering ram to bowl over his comrades









Greek mythological terminology is invoked, often tenuously, for every system and pick-up featured in the game. For example, Jason's Golden Fleece enables Kratos to deflect enemy projectiles and beams at will



The game's numerous collectable items are divided into categories. Collect three of each and you upgrade Kratos to his predestined potential: Gorgon's Eyes to expand your health bar, Phoenix Feathers for magic, and so on

Grunts dissolve into crimson mist without ceremony, while mid-tier enemies must be killed off via the series' divisive QTE finishing moves, the sequence of button presses loosely relating to the gruesome actions that play out behind it. By limiting inputs to the controller's face buttons, and placing each direction at the corresponding edge of the screen, the kill sequence isn't obscured by the interface, allowing you to savour or recoil while you follow the prompts in your peripheral vision.

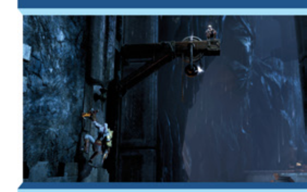
As for utilitarian mutilation, the game delivers: you yank the horn from a minotaur and use it to slice along its underbelly, spilling entrails to the floor with a misty slurp. Later, you pop the eyeball from a cyclops before placing your finger into the socket to control its direction as you ride it about like a bucking bull. A boss battle with Hades has you slicing the muscles one by one from his body, literally weakening your foe piece by piece. The gruesomeness may be consistent with the stories from which the game draws its inspiration, but it's undeniably a one-note take on Greek mythology.

At one point, a villager stuck on a high ledge reaches out a trusting hand in search of aid. A context-sensitive prompt pops on to the screen, surprising the player as Kratos matches it by reaching out his hand as if to offer assistance. A rare moment of compassion for a distressed mortal? Not so, as, in a smooth motion, Zeus' estranged son grasps the back of the villager's head and smashes it into the cliff face without hesitation or quip. The vindictive single-mindedness is consistent with Kratos' character, but it illustrates the lack of nuance or shade that defines the *God Of War* experience. There is no room for remorse or redemption in this agenda, only murder heaped upon murder, with no divergence from the grisly path we first trekked in the original game five years ago.

There's more flexibility to the mechanics, which balance the hack-and-slash onslaught with some thoughtful *Tomb Raider*-esque environmental puzzles. But these interludes always conclude with bloodshed, a means to a vengeful end that never dulls its intensity or makes space for you to breathe.

God Of War 3 reflects the personality of series creator David Jaffe: gruff, plainspoken and entirely focused, but with an assured honesty and confidence about what it is and isn't. For those who subscribe to its unflinching spectacle of violence – in so many ways still the defining approach to the medium – the final *God Of War* in the trilogy stands tall over its contemporaries, pushing the ceiling of expectation in the manner of only a handful of titles. The stuff of legend, then? Indeed. Although, perhaps fittingly, one with nothing new to say. **[8]**

Flay me to the moon



Poor Icarus, whose wings from the second game make another appearance. Holding down the jump button sprouts wings from Kratos' back, granting a few extra metres of travel, which are often crucial to making a long jump. For those ravines that are too wide to leap, you can agitate a nearby harpy with an arrow, before grabbing its legs and flaying its undercarriage to make it fly you across. Later in the game you'll need to leap from harpy to harpy, causing a shower of feathers to fall to the earth below. The Icarus Wings are also used to ascend wind vents, pushing you up on pillars of rising air to mezzanine floors and new tiers of the various environments, adding height to a game that has traditionally only been concerned with width.







Completing the game unlocks additional content in the form of new costumes for Kratos, to make a change from the loincloth, as well as, more meaningfully, a combat arena and a series of challenges



BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2

FORMAT: 360 (MULTIPLAYER TESTED), PC, PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** EA
DEVELOPER: DICE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E210

Connoisseurs of *Battlefield*'s delicious multiplayer formula will recognise *Bad Company 2* as a subtle blend of the easily quaffed *1943* vintage with the depth and player growth of other, bigger team shooters like *Modern Warfare 2*. The triumph of the hugely accessible download-only *1943* has helped DICE to strain out many of the imperfections seen in the previous *Bad Company* game.

Its core Conquest mode remains essentially the same: near-future jarheads of five flexible classes divide into two teams, each with a health bar that shrinks every time a soldier is killed or a flag is lost to the enemy. But it's in the details that DICE has made the most astute changes, the sprawling, beautifully drawn battlegrounds existing as more coherent spaces, and their objectives smartly distributed to avoid bottlenecking and encourage improvisation. Rarely do you feel like you're respawning only to run straight back into the enemy's sights: there is always the opportunity to exploit the environment tactically, using its destruction system to blast new pathways and outflank your opponents.

The destruction model remains a largely prescriptive one, albeit more comprehensive than in previous games. You still can't entirely demolish structures, only their predetermined weak walls, leading to occasional frustrations when the game defies your improvised tactics, or a tiny shred of indestructible scenery catches a bullet intended for someone's skull. But this is a rare irritation. There's no doubting that the level of destruction enriches the game aesthetically and tactically – reducing highly contested locations to smoking husks, and posing a trade-off for attackers: the more they destroy an objective in the process of capturing it, the harder it will be to defend afterwards. As with every iteration in the *Battlefield* series, movement and gunplay feel yet more solid and tactile, the animations communicating an ever-greater sense of embodiment, while the audio sizzles and pops as bullets criss-cross the air above your head, emitting a tinnitus ring with every concussive blast.

The squad system is now implemented with greater clarity, allowing you to more easily partner up with three friends within the battle – but we're still not convinced of the wisdom of being able to respawn with them. Though it certainly obviates the need for a tedious trudge from a spawn point into battle, it is an annoyance when you engage an enemy to discover their reinforcements popping out of thin air. Also curious is the decision to hold back the medic's healing abilities as a later unlock. Generally speaking, weapon and kit unlocks have been intelligently balanced to encourage persistent play without limiting newcomers to a wholly feeble arsenal (a complaint raised about *Modern Warfare 2* and *MAG*). But the medic's initial inability to perform medical duties strikes a bum note – being historically an unpopular class, there is little incentive for new players to experiment with it.

But these are minor quibbles in a game rich with variety, generous with the freedom it gives to the player, and thrilling in its basic action. Only some of this makes its way to the singleplayer experience. *Battlefield*'s solo play has never been really more than a dry run for its multiplayer; even *Bad Company*, with its Three Kings-inspired AWOL romp, never quite convinced as a standalone – its environments were a little bland, a little reliant on duplicated assets, its battles a bit loose and arbitrary, lacking character or significance. *Bad Company 2* sees the pendulum swing the other way – all the way, in fact. Now the ragtag reprobates,

> As with every iteration in the Battlefield series, movement and gunplay feel yet more solid and tactile while the audio sizzles and pops

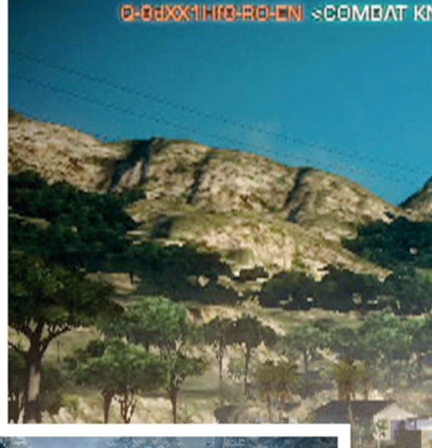
Razing the bar



Additional multiplayer modes show the skill with which DICE recombines its well-worn recipe in new ways. Rush sees the traditional objective-capturing gameplay metamorphose into an asymmetrical, three-tiered battle, in which attackers plant charges in and destroy successive defended locations, each time forcing the defending team to fall back to another. In Squad Deathmatch, players duke it out on a level with a single vehicle. The vehicle is a deadly force, but also an instant target, drawing players out of the woodwork and creating an interesting polarity between dug-in snipers and brazen assaults.

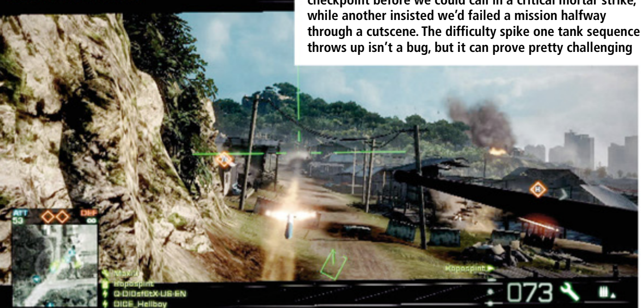








While the first *Bad Company* stuck to one climate, the sequel throws the player from snow-topped peak to jungle to desert to dense favela, drawing vast expanses in sumptuous detail



We encountered two bugs, despite this being a well-polished package. One required us to restart from a checkpoint before we could call in a critical mortar strike, while another insisted we'd failed a mission halfway through a cutscene. The difficulty spike one tank sequence throws up isn't a bug, but it can prove pretty challenging

Cutscenes and action are painfully divorced: the game loves nothing more than to bookend a short, uneventful walk with two sequences that fade in and out to deliver less then five seconds of dialogue. That these little bursts of chatter couldn't be handled during the normal flow of things is baffling







The helicopter controls present quite the learning curve. While this mediates some of the craft's potential power, it also places a big hurdle between new and experienced players – choppers are such a valuable resource that there's little opportunity to practise piloting them without messing things up for the rest of the team

Sarge, Haggard, Stillwater and Marlowe, return to fight their way through vibrantly realised but restrictive corridors, this time in pursuit of a long-lost Japanese superweapon.

Within this controlled environment DICE is able to produce more keenly realised, dramatic moments – tanks explode through scenery with the appropriate cinematic panache, and gunships rise ominously over the horizon to send you and your (surprisingly adept) AI companions scurrying for cover with rattling Gatlings. Combined with the basic competence of the gunplay, this level of care and definition produces a punchy, if guided, singleplayer experience – albeit one reading from a lukewarm script. But a good deal of frustration comes from vainly attempting to apply the tactics and mechanics that make the multiplayer game so dynamic, freeform and exciting.

Flanking objectives is rarely even possible in singleplayer, your route forward always hemmed by impassable terrain, invisible walls or death threats for leaving the battlefield. Some restriction is understandable, but the degree to which seemingly valid tactics are withdrawn is annoying. Attempts to use a sniper rifle to clear the path ahead are often nullified by enemies who only spawn when you get close (occasionally materialising in full view of the player). It feels like you're being cheated of some of your ability to reason and respond.

Most of these are frustrations born of comparison with *Battlefield*'s considerable strengths elsewhere – and it is confounding that just a little more of the dynamism and empowering player choice of multiplayer is not applied in singleplayer. Nonetheless, taken on its own merits, the solo mode has a fair amount to recommend it. Some of its set-pieces, such as a driving mission which sees you blast away Russian APCs while skittering round precipitous mountain roadways, are every bit as adrenalising as *Modern Warfare 2*'s snowmobile chase, and the game chops and changes its pace and location to keep the player continually engaged. DICE's environment artists wield great talent, clearly – in fact, perhaps so much so that they feel a little confined by *Battlefield*'s near-future warfare milieu; seemingly empty desert townships are cast with such a spooky sense of desolation that you wonder if the developers were itching to veer off into the supernatural.

Whatever the oddities and missed opportunities of its singleplayer mode, *Bad Company 2* delivers a fulsome online game that continues to hone a winning formula. It is not as brilliantly clean and concise as *1943*, but it is deeper and more varied, and almost as accessible. With several team-based shooters currently grabbing for your attention, *Bad Company 2* sits assuredly above the rank and file. **[8]**



Finally, DICE has kowtowed to convention and adopted sensible ground vehicle controls: accelerate on the right trigger and reverse on the left. While a well-manned tank can tear up a level, it only takes a single sniper to throw a det-pack underneath its tracks and end its killing spree





NO MORE HEROES 2: DESPERATE STRUGGLE

FORMAT: **WII** RELEASE: **APRIL** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E204**

Travis' duel-wield beam katana, the Rose Nasty, lights up the screen with purple slashes and a trickier finishing move. Temptress and trickster Sylvia is back, and her relationship with Travis takes teasing new turns. Sadly, she no longer whispers to you from your Wii Remote

Working class hero



In *No More Heroes*, Travis Touchdown had to take odd jobs to pay his way into each ranking match. *No More Heroes 2* makes these missions optional, and moves them all to 2D retro-styled minigames. You can take a gig as a pizza deliveryman, cruising the highway on your motorcycle as you race against the clock; or invest in a workout at the gym, where dodging barbells and blown kisses from the tired gay trainer stereotype will help you boost your strength. Winning missions will bring more cash and higher stats, but on the easier settings you'll hardly see the need.

Fans of the first *No More Heroes* will remember scrawny no-hoper Travis Touchdown as a wannabe, scrambling up the ranks of the United Assassins Association and killing everyone in his way. But three years later, he's lost the #1 spot – for reasons we're never told, as the game assumes we don't have the attention span – and now it's time to get back in the fight, for reasons that vary with every cutscene. Sometimes he's out for revenge, other times he's crazy with bloodlust, and near the end he makes a stand for the dignity of fictional assassins. You probably don't care: you're just here to brawl.

The fighting has changed little since the first game. Whether you're using the Wii Remote or the Classic Controller, you execute a handful of combos and then duck away before your enemy strikes back. Special attacks and wrestling moves add to your arsenal, but the all-too-similar enemies won't demand it. Last time around the fighting was repetitive by design, and despite noticeably more enemy types the same is true in *No More Heroes 2*. The first few missions go by quickly, with short warm-ups and easy bosses, but by the last third it becomes a test of stamina, as you cut through ever-greater mobs of henchmen and bosses who take aeons to wear down. *No More Heroes 2* counts on keeping you hooked with vicious button-mashing and the thrill of slicing your beam katana through limbs and torsos, to the point where you won't need variety. The game wins that bet: it's endlessly satisfying to watch this thin, nervy loser attack again and again, hacking like a wolverine that masturbates too much.

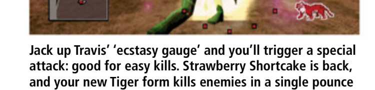
As with the first game, *No More Heroes 2* marries junk-culture tropes to its beat 'em up action. The visual style incorporates lens flare and even emulates the look of worn-out old kung fu reels, while cutscenes dole out the expected level of "Wha?", stealing from a different genre for each boss – from slasher horror to a wistful coming-of-age romance. And yet these moments are less astounding and persuasive than in the first game. The bosses might be of a generally higher standard, but their inspirations are more obvious (especially in the finale), and many of them seem confused as to what they're doing here in the first place.

Meanwhile, everything that previously made Travis' life believable has been pared down for convenience. Where he used to have to work odd jobs to make the money for each fight, he can now zip from battle to battle without a pause. Meanwhile, those jobs have been reduced from demeaning thirdperson grinds to zippy 8bit-throwback minigames, which are quick but not memorable. The overworld map is also gone, and while cutting it – and all the drab streets – sounds like a good idea, a better one would be to make a city that's smaller but still worth your while exploring.

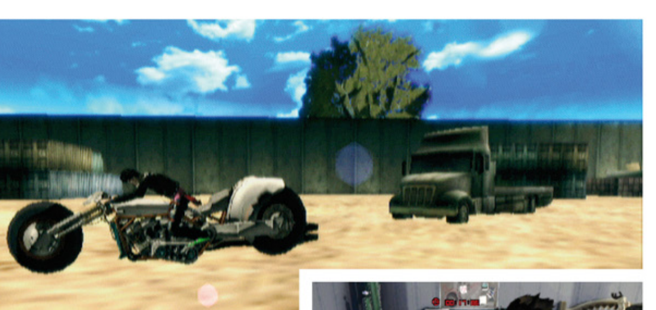
The game adds new playable characters, but does little with them. Travis' brother Henry has a cameo fight, and two of the missions cast you as Shinobu, one of the bosses from the first game. But Shinobu fights more or less the same way as Travis, and her levels also force you to finish rudimentary jumping exercises that highlight the wonkiness of the camera.

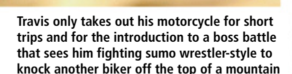
The original title won fans for its shocks and surprises; the second takes no risks. While its ultraviolence is slick and satisfying, its schtick has calcified. *Bayonetta* has raised the bar for ridiculous action and jaw-dropping style, making *No More Heroes* the safe and timid alternative. It's a love letter to the fans, when perhaps what's needed is shock therapy. **[7]**





Jack up Travis' 'ecstasy gauge' and you'll trigger a special attack: good for easy kills. Strawberry Shortcake is back, and your new Tiger form kills enemies in a single pounce





Travis only takes out his motorcycle for short trips and for the introduction to a boss battle that sees him fighting sumo wrestler-style to knock another biker off the top of a mountain

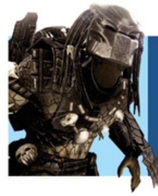








On PC, *AVP* has been snapped up by graphics card makers desperate to show off DX11 graphics. Sadly, the advantage of playing from a sofa on 360 far outweighs any desktop tricks, the colony levels stealing the show



ALIENS VS PREDATOR

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA **DEVELOPER:** REBELLION
PREVIOUSLY IN: E205, E207, E209

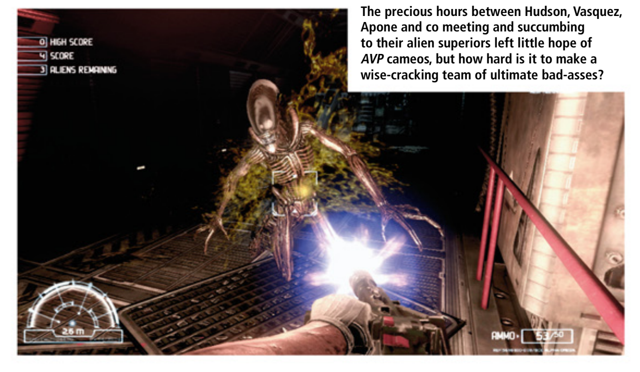
Sega's attempt to resuscitate *Aliens*, a franchise even Hollywood deems unfit for all but a Ridley Scott reboot, could certainly have gone better. Two promised games – an RPG by Obsidian and the Gearbox FPS *Colonial Marines* – have not been delivered. Instead we get this, a hastily assembled three-in-one anachronism which proves just one thing: that terrifying and terrible are not mutually exclusive.

It also challenges the assumption that if you divide something by three, what you get are thirds. The Predator and Alien campaigns, though quite brilliant from a visual-interface standpoint, are just tutorials for games that never come, full of bots, interchangeable objectives and equally pointless cutscenes. Franchise loyalist Lance Henriksen appears in a few, his screen time suggesting he was charging by the word. That leaves the Marines, as always, to clean up the mess. And, for a couple of pant-wetting hours, you're fooled into thinking they might.

Like a Xenomorph scuttling between ducts and shadows, *AVP* offers fleeting glimpses of a beautifully effective machine. Over ten years old in videogame form, these Aliens are surprisingly subversive enemies. Charging like zombies one minute, they dart off into the scenery the next, spawning and respawning on a constant, dizzying basis. Only a well-tossed flare lights them up for a couple of seconds, before they completely disappear from view again.

For those first few stages, as your nondescript band of grunts lands in a familiar 'shake-and-bake' colony, sets up familiar sentry guns and makes familiar pops with its motion detectors, the idea of taking on more than one Alien at a time is mortifying. Then it comes, after several false alarms, and you backpedal through every clip to your one infinite resource: a feeble pistol. A strobe-infested nightclub offers hope of a more progressive take on the source material, then you push into deeper, darker, less inspired territory and everything begins to fall apart. The tiny context zones for ammo pickups, insta-kill exploding corpses and largely invisible face-huggers are simply too much for you or the game to take.

This is a multiplayer game, then, because no one gave it time to be anything else. The modes of note are Infestation (a take on *Counter-Strike*'s Zombie mod, in which a single Alien converts a squad of soldiers one victim at a time) and Predator Hunt (the same initial odds but with a Predator who's happy to skip the converting bit). The control systems for both leviathans make a lot of sense, but a basic block/counter melee system doesn't work very well, and needs constant onscreen prompts to work at all. Worse are the stealth and trophy kills which leave you standing like a lemon for an epic animation, breaking the same simple rule as the AVP movies: that Aliens and Predators should be heard and not seen. **[5]**

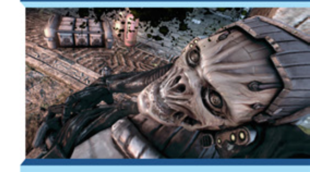


The precious hours between Hudson, Vasquez, Apone and co meeting and succumbing to their alien superiors left little hope of *AVP* cameos, but how hard is it to make a wise-cracking team of ultimate bad-asses?



By the time DLC arrives to bulk up the game's map count, the barebones lobby system, stammering flow and general disarray of multiplayer should have, ahem, alienated most of *AVP*'s players. Preowned shelves should prepare for the invasion

Knives, sharp sticks...



Wish-fulfilment completists will be happy, at least, that Rebellion has gone to every length to include all of the expected weapons. Predators can switch between the energy-draining plasma caster, boomerang disc and spam-happy spear; Marines carry the pulse rifle, pistol, smartgun, shotgun, flame thrower, sniper rifle and grenades; Aliens just bring themselves, of course, transitioning with a trigger pull between floors, wall and ceiling. Target a nearby victim or duct and you can auto-lunge, just as the Predator can target nearby platforms and leap. All of these should be a bit more fun than they are, the Alien FOV should be wider, and with a 'story' like this game's, both aliens should consider sacking their agents.



YAKUZA 3

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E196

Mass distraction



The wealth of minigames populating *Yakuza*'s world is capped by *Boxcelios*, a slick variant of the *R-Type* boss-battle mould. Located in the Club Sega arcade emporiums, it comes as a welcome break from the back-and-forth drudgery of the main story and puts to shame much of the paid-for DLC doing the rounds nowadays.

Comprising some 40 levels in which writhing chrome beasts are lined up for your blaster sights, it's an obsessive-compulsive challenge racing to the finish and hitting the sweet spots of each dazzling lump of design. It's enough to make you forgive the presence of *Virtua Fighter* cabinets that just plain don't work.

If *Yakuza* is creator/producer Toshiro Nagoshi's Godfather then, aptly and unfortunately, the third iteration to make it to the west is his Part III.

Picking up where *Yakuza 2* left off, with Kazuma Kiryu resisting the gravitational pull of his criminal roots by fostering children en masse (such is the subtlety of *Yakuza*'s storytelling devices), the opening act of *Yakuza 3* is a shockingly sedate affair, shunning the uber-violence of the series' lore in favour of some bold, if laborious, attempts at actual character development.

The original *Yakuza* and its sequel were arch-deceivers themselves: old-school button-bashers disguised with some gritty urban environments and coloured by the visual and verbal language of a deranged soap opera. The latest iteration, however, fumbles the series' main attractions with regular, mandatory excursions into the script's heady thematic concerns – taking in everything from governmental ties with the mob to the viability of a cowboy hat on a date – that stunt the game's growth as the freeform lifestyle sim it aspires to be.

Offering a gamut of minigames and extras, from seaside fishing to a library of fine whiskeys, may give a sense of place and layers of authenticity, but when they're bolted on to such a preachy, pushy main story they inevitably become outlets for frustration with the core experience rather than the refreshing, indulgent stimulation they purport to be. It's frequently possible to miss out on explanatory hints and tutorials because of the invasive thrust of the plot, which propels the characters without adequately informing you that it's OK to take a detour around town.

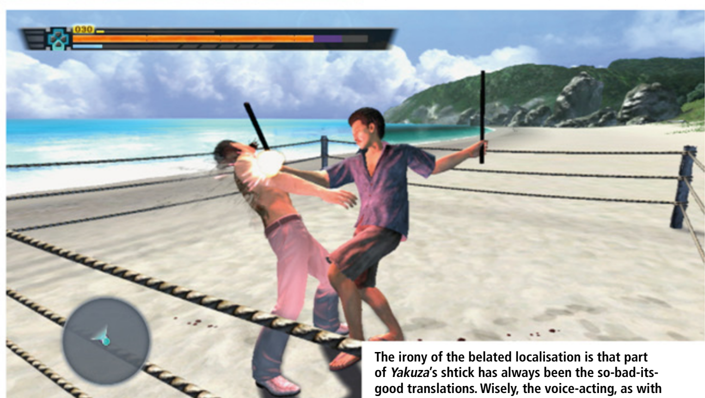
Which isn't to say the qualities that made this series a name aren't alive and kicking. At its peak *Yakuza 3* is a gut-punch of street-fighting mayhem, its simple, responsive controls shaken with visual flourishes (face-stomping is as guilty and useful a finisher as ever) and item collecting capable of eliciting otaku fever. The new features are welcome, too: a firstperson mode allows for the dual purpose of taking in the sights and acquiring new, context-relevant moves (photograph a granny on a bike and earn a somersault, naturally), while the chase scenarios are more immediate realtime variations on QTEs. The story also has its merits: villains are painted with a broad flamboyance to contrast with the serenity of the story's innocent other half, and the parallels between Kiryu's orphanage and the underworld hierarchy of human nature are at times cutting and succinct.

Rather than simply dressing their franchise emperor in current-gen clothes, Nagoshi and new writer Masayoshi Yokoyama should be given kudos for the decision to sow fresh narrative seeds for the gameworld before reaping, burning and brutalising the crop in a way only the new Sega auteurs know how.

Amid *Yakuza 3*'s cinematic and narrative aspirations is a functional, pared-down JRPG and a feisty but flawed translation of the side-scrolling beat 'em up into the third dimension. It's just difficult to see it through the fog of sake and all that chatter. **[6]**

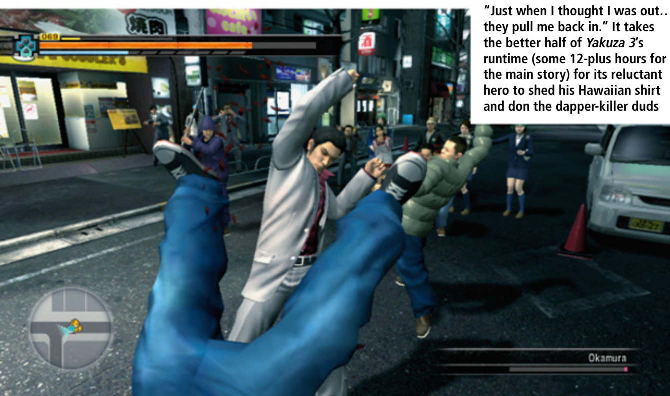


The new default thirdperson perspective may in fact be to *Yakuza*'s detriment. No longer are the ground-level fights a contrast to the framing of the high-rise angles



The irony of the belated localisation is that part of *Yakuza*'s shtick has always been the so-bad-its-good translations. Wisely, the voice-acting, as with *Yakuza 2*, remains unchanged from its native tongue

Main man Kiryu's orphanage is more like a beachside resort, replete with the usual recreational activities of fishing, wrestling and advanced martial arts training



"Just when I thought I was out… they pull me back in." It takes the better half of *Yakuza 3*'s runtime (some 12-plus hours for the main story) for its reluctant hero to shed his Hawaiian shirt and don the dapper-killer duds







The game employs a mixed-media approach, combining static, *Policenauts*-esque backdrops with high-definition hand-drawn anime cutscenes, animated 3D renders, 2D character portraits and, finally, some explorable, low-polygon 3D environments



Battles take place both on the ground and in the air, since the squadron's mechs have airborne capabilities, and later in the game you can move the battle between the two



SAKURA WARS: SO LONG, MY LOVE

FORMAT: PS2, WII (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: APRIL 2 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
DEVELOPER: IDEA FACTORY



Divided into chapters with interstitial 'eye-catches', the game has the pacing and structure of an anime series. The influence extends to the dialogue and performances, which are both bold and primary-coloured







Rudimentary diagrams viewable during the interstitial phases of the game reveal in overt terms how well your relationship-building is going, giving clues as to where you need to work harder to win over your comrades

The aesthetic may be that of an '80s Saturday morning anime but, beneath the wide eyes and quivering soliloquies, *Sakura Wars* makes its own claim to the 'interactive drama' tag recently applied to *Heavy Rain*. For the first few hours you do little more than socialise and carry out menial tasks, not through QTEs but via dropdown menu options, that acclimatise you and your Japanese character to his new station in New York City. Shinjiro Taiga, the 19-year-old nephew of a high-ranking military officer, is eager to please but must first win the trust of his American comrades. He proves his work ethic during the group's evening activities, putting on Noh productions at the theatre, a venue that also doubles as their Thunderbirds-esque base of operations.

The premise may be wild-eyed, but the systems that fire it are robust. As with the *Persona* series, play is divided into two distinct phases: socialising via dialogue trees and battling. The two components are linked: the stronger Shinjiro's relationships with his teammates, the more effective their performance in combat, encouraging a conscientious approach to both.

In a nod to *Valkyria Chronicles*' bold reinvention of the tactical RPG, the battling has you piloting your squadron's clutch of mechs around 3D environments in turn-based face-offs. Movement and attacks share the same cost gauge, so the farther you wish to travel around the environment, the less scope there is for offence. The strategy multiplies with team link-up attacks, which increase in effectiveness the more 'friendly' you are with the other character. The over-heavy use of character introduction stills before each attack bloats the experience, protracting downtime between moments of interactivity, but the over-the-top presentation has the sort of exuberant Japanese charm that's seldom seen today.

The story also has charming moments, but its adolescent skew, not to mention its lack of nuance, restricts its appeal to the eager young Japanophile. Indeed, the dialogue's eagerness to moralise and instruct its player in the ways of politeness, honour and hard work may fit with the stiff-collar military themes, but it's also preachy. Nevertheless, by limiting the cast to a few key characters, and placing mechanical emphasis on nurturing their interpersonal relationships, *Sakura Wars* succeeds in forcing you to invest and care about the team and, by association, its fate.

One part a gently xenophobic, instructional tale for the young, conservative Japanese male and one part *Valkyria Chronicles: Mech Edition*, this, the first *Sakura Wars* to find its way out of Japan, deserves the small but vociferous following it will no doubt find. **[7]**

Conversation tree



In contrast to the ponderous pacing of most adventure games, the majority of conversations in *Sakura Wars: So Long, My Love* are set against a time limit (represented by a somewhat incongruous steampunk gauge that surrounds the dialogue options). This forces you into quick decision-making – not to mention skim-reading. Choose a wise response and a triumphant fanfare sounds, indicating a rise in the other person's estimation of your character. Conversely, choose an overly flirtatious, boastful or limp-wristed response and their disdain will be resounding – you'll have to work that much harder to win their affection or respect.



Panau is undeniably beautiful, and more varied than the last game's tropical island, too. Snow-capped peaks and dense jungle are never more than a couple of minutes in a helicopter and a quick skydive apart



Some environments are destructible, which can be realised to spectacular effect. What can and can't be torn to shreds feels inconsistent, however



Dogfighting is always an option, of course, but any air-to-air combat that doesn't end with you bailing out of your vehicle and into the cockpit of your attacker's is, in our view, an opportunity wasted

JUST CAUSE 2

FORMAT: 360, PS3, PC **RELEASE:** MARCH 26
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** AVALANCHE STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E186, E200, E209

If the first *Just Cause* felt like a two-week break in the Caribbean short on interesting things to do, then *Just Cause 2* can feel, at times, like your average package holiday: a series of activities and excursions ranging from thoroughly entertaining to so monotonous that you're relieved to make it back to the hotel bar.

Rico remains a fantastically versatile protagonist. His grappling hook returns, and continues to exert its irresistible pull (literally so, for those guards unfortunate enough to be posted on lookout towers). No longer a separate weapon, however, the grapple can be activated with a button tap at any time, attaches to almost anything, and can be used in conjunction with Rico's inexhaustible supply of parachutes to fling him around the map from a standing start. It's exhilarating, and the defining feature of *Just Cause 2*, coming into its own when used to hijack a helicopter in mid-air.

Other changes include the introduction of the 'chaos' system, which quantifies the destruction you unleash upon the property of the fictional east Asian island of Panau and its dictatorial regime. Accumulate enough chaos and you unlock new weapons and vehicles for purchase on the game's black market, new side missions, and further developments along the game's main storyline. It should be an effective way of making sure the ad-hoc carnage at which the game excels genuinely contributes to your overall progress, but it's let down by the fact that the bars representing the chaos you've caused fail to move along at any meaningful rate. There's something disappointing about finding your spontaneous and thoroughly destructive assault on a military complex has had little to no effect on the infrastructure of Panau, and there are times when trying to unlock the next storyline mission can feel more like grinding for experience points in an MMORPG than racing to the next chapter of a breathless action thriller. Eventually you'll realise the only meaningful way to progress in the game is to take part in one of the many side missions offered by the various criminal factions based on the island.

And what a mixed bag they are. Whereas the first game's missions so often suffered from being uninspired, *Just Cause 2* serves up equal measures of fun and frustration, along with the occasional treat. The best missions combine challenge, spectacle and even humour, with the opening levels – an assault on a satellite facility and a visit to a supposedly haunted island – being particular highlights. Unfortunately, later missions resort to the first game's trick of throwing masses of anti-air weaponry and irritatingly accurate enemies at the player while asking them to whittle down the health bar of a target wielding a rocket launcher. These missions turn Rico the daredevil assassin into Rico the grunt, waging a one-man war of attrition from whatever cover he can find.

Like its predecessor, *Just Cause 2* can hardly be called an average game. It's a good one undermined by a selection of mediocre elements, and it's all the more frustrating this time around because Avalanche shows us glimpses of just how much fun two weeks on holiday with Rico should be. **[7]**





One of the more entertaining uses for the grappling hook's new tether ability (above). Unfortunately, it can be a touch awkward to use in the heat of battle

Aggressive expansion



Throughout the game, Rico is required (or at least he is if he wants to expand his allies' territory and unlock more side missions) to take part in several 'stronghold' missions for criminal cartels. These take the form of simple escort missions in which you must guide an NPC to the heart of a military complex, and they all play out the same way. Open the gates to the complex, Rico! Watch out, Rico – snipers! Avoid that mounted gun! Turn the gun back on approaching waves of enemies while I hack the computer, Rico! We did it, Rico! Now hop over to the next mission marker and do it again!





THE MISADVENTURES OF PB WINTERBOTTOM

FORMAT: 360 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K PLAY **DEVELOPER:** THE ODD GENTLEMEN

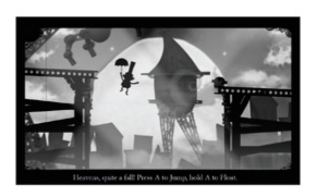
Intimidating though it must be to follow in the footsteps of *Braid*, The Odd Gentlemen's XBLA platform-puzzler is an assured effort. It's a pacier and more light-hearted game, which ditches *Braid*'s earnest pseudishness in favour of an archly rhymed fable following the travails of the eponymous pie thief. On one particular night of gluttonous abandon, Winterbottom's insatiable desire for pastry leaves the town's bakery aflame and its clock tower smashed. Then, following some mystical dough-based calamity, he finds himself with the power to control time and able to right his wrongs – a process which, conveniently enough, involves eating every pie he sees.

The game's levels present Winterbottom with a number of pies to be devoured before access to the next stage is granted. But they aren't easy to reach. Luckily, Winterbottom can record his actions by holding a trigger which, when released, replays on a loop as a ghostly clone. In this manner, Winterbottom can propel himself by standing in the path of his clone's swishing brolly, or set up elaborate relays to ensure all the pies are eaten within a time limit or in a particular order, depending on each level's increasingly tortuous requirements. Some puzzles limit the number of recordings you can have on simultaneous replay, forcing you to record over a single clone even as you jump off its soon-to-be-erased head.



As you work your way through the main game you unlock a healthy number of time trials – levels crammed full of pies and an unlimited supply of clones. The only puzzle concerns how to devour them more efficiently than your competitors on the online leaderboards

Winterbottom squeezes out a decent variety of tricks, and none outstay their welcome. Few really tax the brain – the hardest are those which require fiddly execution, easily sabotaged by bumping into a clone and breaking its recorded path. One puzzle sequence that restricts the starting of recordings to particular portals is perhaps not well explained. Regardless, the game is sumptuously constructed – its spindly and grotesque sense of caricature is a delight and the lively score is maddeningly hummable. Next to *Braid*'s heartier meal it is something of a confection, but it's to its credit that despite the similarity between the games' time-twisting mechanics, *The Misadventures Of PB Winterbottom* is never tainted by a sense of déjà vu. **[8]**





The cartoon panels that appear between levels, describing the effects of your actions upon the town at large, are pitched just right: family-friendly but with a sharp tongue and a keen sense of the absurd



CALLING

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** Q1 2010
PUBLISHER: KONAMI **DEVELOPER:** HUDSON SOFT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E211



The game's clever use of mobile phones (to connect with the spirit world and warp out of limbo) is borrowed from the movie Pulse. It's a clever premise but is used in a disappointingly linear fashion

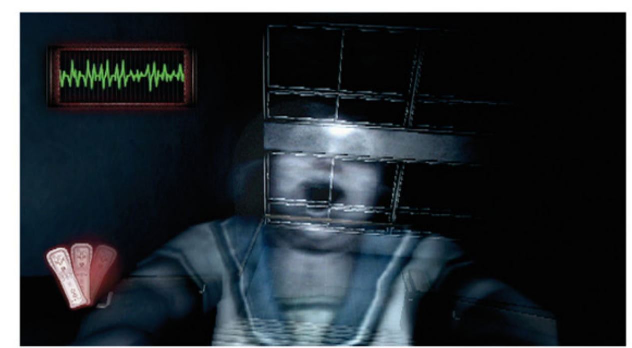
A general rule of horror movies suggests that the less you see, the more frightening the scares. Every classic chiller from Alien to The Ring understood that. *Calling* does too, but it would take a braver developer than Hudson Soft to attempt to sustain suspense for a game's entire run. As a result, *Calling*'s build-ups far outstrip its payoffs.

A few hairy moments in, and any attempt to get back under your skin is redundant. Mostly this is because the game's resident evil is largely incapable of harming you, and any sense of jeopardy is lost. It equates to being pursued by a murderer armed with a feather – only scary until he catches you, at which point it becomes farce.

In recognition of this, later stages implement some odd design choices to bolster the challenge, but aimless wandering and spooks capable of killing you in a heartbeat do not make for a more persuasive experience.

On the plus side the game's audio design is simply excellent. Indistinct scrabblings, uneven footfalls and, crucially, the trill of a mobile phone are layered together to skin-crawling effect. The ability to use discarded mobile phones to warp from one area to another is also a welcome touch.

Calling is a game that tries hard to reinvigorate the survival-horror genre. The firstperson perspective allows the game to avoid using clunky controls to generate tension, instead opting for cinematic tricks. But such movie-literate flourishes are meaningless when the game is too polite to deliver on its promise – or should that be threat? **[5]**



Ghosts can shake you to scare you to death, but they are easily exorcised with a wave of the Remote. The result is a complete lack of tension, even when your pursuer calls you up and threatens to give chase

INFINITE SPACE

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: MARCH 26 PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: PLATINUM/NUDE MAKER PREVIOUSLY IN: E196

If you think spaceship customisation means swapping 15,000 Palladium for the Normandy's heavy ship armour, you're in for a shock. *Infinite Space*'s ships are more than RPG heroes waiting to be decked out in stat-boosting finery. They are made to order. Do you favour the missile-laden, heavily shielded attack dog or the graceful swan, arcing laser fire from afar? Does a happy crew keep the engine purring, or could their bunks be better used for storing shield generators? One creative flash saw a ship so full of crew cabins the swollen ranks could overrun enemy fleets.

Tinkering has a clear, tangible effect on battles. A simple rock-paper-scissors combat system – dodges negate barrages, but empower normal shots – only emphasises the strength of rocks, paper and scissors. Invest in battle speed and fights are breakneck clashes. Pump resources into one massive cannon and battles become agonising waiting games, reading rival ships for signs of dodge-worthy fire. Finding a potent blend can annihilate the difficulty curve, but mission-specific criteria – taking a captain alive or protecting certain ships – encourage experimentation.

Steel Battalion looms over Nude Maker's brisk command-deck patter and the simulated onscreen control



Ship construction echoes *Resident Evil*'s suitcase inventory, squeezing awkwardly shaped parts into a limited space. By all means devise your dream ship design, but can you make it fit?

panels. There's nothing to match thumbing *Steel Battalion*'s ignition key, but stabbing at the barrage button in a last-ditch attempt to down a quarry is a geeky thrill. Platinum neatly grafts on a narrative: as our captain matures, so do his combat options. New crewmen add not only statistical bonuses but intriguing new voices. Random events turn grinding into surprise side missions.

The scale occasionally escapes the development team. Ship stats can't be directly compared across the fleet, and the absence of a mission log is a silly oversight. As ship parts enter triple digits, with crew numbers not far behind, interfaces grow unwieldy. But it is the same clutter that endears *Infinite Space* to begin with. Fat with content, melodrama and fun, few DS games can match its ambitions. **[8]**





In combat, dodges can save you from a barrage but amplify normal attacks. A simple colour-coded charge system hints at your rival's tactical options, but trying to second guess their decisions is a tense affair



ALICE IN WONDERLAND

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: DISNEY
DEVELOPER: ETRANGES LIBELLULE PREVIOUSLY IN: E212



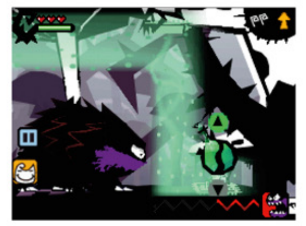
Babysitting Alice reminds us of protecting Ashley in *Resident Evil 4*. If the guards pull her into the vortex, you have limited time to defeat them and retrieve the pop-eyed heroine before losing her ends the game

Etranges Libellule's DS puzzler is not a tie-in for Tim Burton's Alice In Wonderland, but a correction: not the film you'll see in cinemas, but the film you had hoped to see. Burton's sickly 3D confection is reworked into his trademarked jagged black-and-white. White Rabbit, Mad Hatter, Caterpillar and Cheshire Cat are redrawn as bug-eyed freaks; creations straight out of Burton's twisted anthology The Melancholy Death Of Oyster Boy. It even swaps the polite English voice employed in the film for surreal and obnoxious Americanisms.

Mechanically, things get curiouser and curiouser. Alice is shepherded around obstacles by our four interchangeable heroes. While sharing combat and platforming abilities, their unique powers birth *Lost Vikings*-esque co-op puzzles. Powers – manipulating time, gravity, physics and perspective – are drip fed over time, enabling *Metroid*-like back-and-forth in the free-roaming Wonderland. Not that backtracking is ever an issue: the world map exists as a jigsaw puzzle to be rebuilt, opening new routes and shortcuts between levels.

Compared to its Wii counterpart – as generic a movie-licensed collect 'em up as you'll see – the DS version is swollen with ideas. Colour-coding neatly matches heroes to puzzles and adds surreal bursts of colour into the world. Simple 2D landscapes cleverly warp, forcing you to traverse them upside-down, flipped-round and – in one lovely moment – in a watery reflection. Combat conjures less magic. Fighting the Red Queen's guards is a repetitive affair, its ease undermining the benefits of hunting down each character's advanced battle moves.

There are times when the hardware lets it down. As in *Scribblenauts*, too much is asked of stylus-only control. Context-sensitive platforming is a chore, especially when trying to drag Alice along with you. And in combat – a mess of rolls, dashes and blocks – you'll long for the 'eat me', 'drink me' simplicity of Carroll's original. Kinks fail to derail the game, but we'd like to have seen how this quirkily distinctive vision would've played out on Wii. **[7]**



Bosses graduate from the same school as those in *Zelda* games: offed with recently acquired powers, they're more puzzles than challenges. They can take more than three hits, however





BLAZBLUE: CALAMITY TRIGGER

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: PQUBE **DEVELOPER:** ARC SYSTEM WORKS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E203

Birthed as a replacement to the bombastic *Guilty Gear* series – for which Arc System Works recently lost the rights – *BlazBlue* treads a fine line between innovation and tradition. Certainly the Yokohama-based developer never strays too far from the twitchy, screen-filling aesthetic of its previous work. *BlazBlue* may enjoy a colour palette more suited to its name, but the character designs – all cruel swords and vicious hairdos – the hard rock soundtrack, and the firework particle effects that punctuate each fight are comfortably familiar. Likewise, the pin-sharp 2D realisation of each of the 12 fighters and the lavish 3D sets on which they fight feel every bit the logical progression.

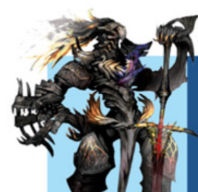
But the game distinguishes itself from its elder stepbrother with slower pacing and, in an effort to redress *Guilty Gear*'s biggest failing, more refined balance. In functional terms, this is still a four-button fighter, offense divided into weak, medium, strong and drive attacks that are generally chained from light to heavy. Most special moves are based on *Street Fighter* quarter- and half-turn motions, with only one character using the charge style popularised by the likes of Guile. Fast Cancelling functions in a similar way to Focus Attack Dash Cancelling, enabling you to expend half of the super meter to skip out of an attack animation and side-step into a new combo, and these borrowed ideas serve the game well.

The Drive system, however, can be called *BlazBlue*'s own, bestowing each character with an individual special effect. For Ragna, the Soul Eater Drive makes attacks absorb his opponent's health while Jin's Frost Bite Drive freezes rivals in ice. Hakuman's Zanshin Drive acts as a *Third Strike*-esque parry, while Rachel's Slipheed blows a gust of wind that will knock any projectile off course. These unusual specials can be linked into standard combos and force interesting tactical change-ups. So Arc triumphs in delivering a debut of rare success in the genre: one at once fresh yet familiar, both visually arresting and mechanically enticing. **[8]**





The two 'lead' characters, Ragna and Jin Kisaragi, are more than lookalikes for *Guilty Gear*'s Sol Badguy and Ky Kiske



WHITE KNIGHT CHRONICLES

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SONY **DEVELOPER:** LEVEL-5, SCE JAPAN STUDIO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E212



Things that have changed in this localised version of Level-5's *White Knight Chronicles*: the voices and text are now in English. Things that haven't changed: the generic storyline, the marked disparity between the game's early trailers and the actual graphics, and a menu so intricate that it feels like you should win a badge for making it work.

Not a roaring success, then, but not a total failure either. *White Knight Chronicles* is competent and solid without ever being beautiful or, you'll find yourself realising with a scratch of the head 15 hours in, particularly enjoyable. The plot – unassuming commoner, captured princess, hidden powers, massive quest – is certainly an issue. But if the 'chase the pretty royal' narrative is retrograde, the combat at least reaches for innovation. Battles play out in *World Of Warcraft*-like realtime, with the player moving freely and plucking attacks from a shortcut selection at the bottom of the screen. The system's big idea is the ability to build custom combos from the unlockable moves your characters assemble. And as an idea it works fine – the system is deep, with scores of potential attacks to explore – but in truth you'll soon settle on a favourite and forget the experimentation. All combat is managed by a timed Command Circle – a charge-meter that fills before attacks are unleashed – and there's no noticeable time difference between weaker and stronger attacks, so no reason to vary your approach.



One early task has you escorting this wine cart across *White Knight*'s drab hills-and-hostile-creatures geography. It's not a memorable trip

The game's last throw of the dice is a *Monster Hunter*-influenced online mode, which has your custom-built character (who hovers silently in the background of the main game) joining with up to three other players to complete co-op missions. It has an awkward parallel relationship with the singleplayer game: your items and skills are consistent, but otherwise events in one don't affect the other. Which leaves it smart but ultimately hollow – and that's *White Knight Chronicles* all over. **[5]**





Like an elaborate, flaming Trojan horse, the fire circus reveals itself to be a giant Magi attack party. It's one of the few moments of arresting, original design in a game packed with genre standards


Fallout
A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game



TIME EXTEND

FALLOUT

FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **INTERPLAY**
DEVELOPER: **BLACK ISLE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **1997**

How Black Isle's post-nuclear roleplaying game built choice, chance and consequence into its absorbingly authentic in-game fiction

Videogames are usually built upon the fantastical, but so often they neglect to nurture a believable fiction. They force their stories down our throats, or fatally undermine their integrity by giving the player too much agency, or claim to offer choice and consequence while taunting us with invincible player characters and predetermined decisions. *Fallout*, though, creates a world that feels believable, cohesive and uncompromising, employing subtle writing and flexible, consistent game design in the quest for internal coherence. It forces the player to actually roleplay, working with your character's skills and strengths to see situations play out in all manner of ways. Through individual behaviour and choices, *Fallout* lets us create our own stories in a way that aspirational developers still struggle to achieve.

Fallout's opening cutscene sets the tone for the series' hallmark retro-futurism, satirising 1950s Cold War paranoia even as it presents a brutal depiction of the exact alternate future that it feared. The camera zooms out from a TV playing cheerful ads suffused with American Dream hyper-optimism to reveal the crumbling skyline of a devastated city. It imagined post-apocalyptic America long before it became a cliché, and it's not a pleasant place. *Fallout*'s relentlessly bleak outlook on humanity damns us as squabbling, self-serving and violent, consigning ourselves to a piteous wasteland existence through our obsession with war. Everything in the world is rusting, broken: the guns, the cars, the buildings, the people. Its deserts are full of aggressive mutated wildlife, its scattered settlements and cities are mostly populated by drug addicts, bandits and slave traders, permeated by the destructive absence of hope.

It's a game rich in stories, and each player weaves the threads into their own intricate tapestry of chance, choice and consequence. These stories are found, created, rather than simply told. The overarching narrative provides context for the player – a refugee from one of the underground vaults that protected some of humanity from the nuclear holocaust – rather than dictating their actions. *Fallout*'s crossroads moments aren't always obvious; a good branching story bends in ways you're not even aware it can, and the suspension of disbelief is never punctured by the obviousness of the choices.

You have to work on the assumption that people are looking for the slightest excuse to kill you and scavenge your corpse for your weapon

Possibly the most distressing thing about *Fallout*'s setting is its prescience – forced into a pointless, filthy struggle to stay alive, this is a convincing portrayal of what might become of the human race. It's violent, nasty, and you have to work on the assumption that people are looking for the slightest excuse to kill you and scavenge your corpse for your weapon, or the meaningless bottlecaps that have become the only thing the world can use as currency. A crucial element of *Fallout*'s continuity is its insistence on self-reliance; it leaves you to learn on your own, gathering information and equipment from the few non-hostile characters you encounter. Without a tutorial in sight, the player is chucked out of the safety of Vault 13 and told to find a water chip, given only the tiniest bit of guidance as to where to go. You're on your own with an old pistol and a



STUPID GAME

Fallout's insistence on roleplay is central to the game – your original stats screen determines your whole manner of play, and those numbers have a real, tangible effect. A character with an intelligence of less than four, for instance, is unable to speak in anything other than grunts and mangled half-sentences, and will fail to elicit anything more than pity from anyone he meets. Although being unable to have a conversation closes off the vast majority of the game's options and nearly all of the side-quests, it is possible to complete the game as a simpleton. The 'Stupid Game' challenge became popular enough for Black Isle to incorporate it into *Fallout 2*.





knife, and though you pick up companions as time goes by, that feeling of isolation and desperation never dissipates.

Fallout's best stories feel incidental – things that you simply come across one day in the wasteland, or uncover by accident in one of its cities, and that you wouldn't know existed unless you'd happened upon them. Wasteland encounters like a crashed UFO or a band of ghouls may provide a valuable item or hint, but they point the player in interesting directions, leaving room for the imagination. It works because it's not explicit, leaving you to draw inferences from the world, to make up and investigate your own quest lines. You might think that Junktown's sinister Doc Morbid's extreme rudeness is borne out of caution, just like everyone else in the wasteland – unless you happen to be scavenging his house for ammo at night and find the manhole leading to his secret butcher's shop, where he and his dwarf assistant prepare their patients for sale as snacks in a neighbouring town. If Doc Morbid's tongue-in-cheek name isn't *Fallout*'s only flash of black humour, then nor is Vault Boy, the cheerfully grinning face of nuclear disaster. *Fallout* flashes its gallows humour like a wicked grin, elevating the mood without undermining the tone.

The game owes much of its intrigue to the level of detail. *Fallout* realises with words and situations a rich, detailed, tortured and desolate landscape that it can't show with a limited colour palette and isometric sprites. Scrolling text descriptions at the bottom-left of the interface embellish what's onscreen with incidental detail; where you see a brown clump of pixels oozing red, the text describes how a mutated mole-rat, fatally wounded from a crippling injury to the right leg, crumples and dies. Character descriptions, dialogue, even the manual all feature a descriptive verbosity that greatly enriches the game's fiction.

As well as finding stories, *Fallout* excels at letting you create them. Generally, videogame moral decisions amount to either giving a begging tramp 20 credits in the hope that he'll turn up again later with a nice item or shooting him in the kneecaps for the experience points. Either way, there's a reward, and the Right Thing To Do is often patronisingly obvious. *Fallout* screws with this primary-school perception of good and evil. The harsh reality is that there are usually two bad choices, and at best you're forced into the least morally reprehensible course of action. *Fallout* is aware that being a good person can mean doing a terrible thing, and the game never attempts to moralise. It's a far cry from "nuke the village for money, or save it for a house".

Fallout realises with words and situations a rich, detailed landscape that it can't show with a limited colour palette and isometric sprites

Indeed, one of *Fallout*'s key quest lines – determining the fate of Junktown – was so distressingly morally ambiguous that Interplay demanded that the outcomes be altered. When the Vault Dweller first stumbles across it, the settlement is locked in a power struggle between mayor Killian and gambling mogul Gizmo, whose criminal activities bring both financial prosperity and problems to the town. Originally, siding with Killian against Gizmo turned the town into an authoritarian nightmare, led by Killian's own personal version of frontier justice; siding with Gizmo turned it into a filthy rich but morally bankrupt den of sin. In the final release, though, the outcomes had been forcibly changed to provide a 'good' and a 'bad' ending, wherein Killian enforces just law and increases prosperity or Gizmo simply increases his own wealth before choking to death on a chunk of Iguana-on-a-stick.

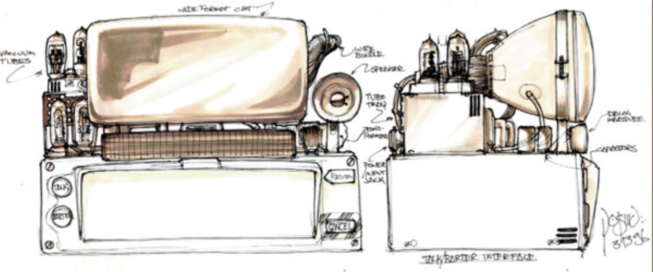
The game is built, from the ground up, around the pitiless imperative for



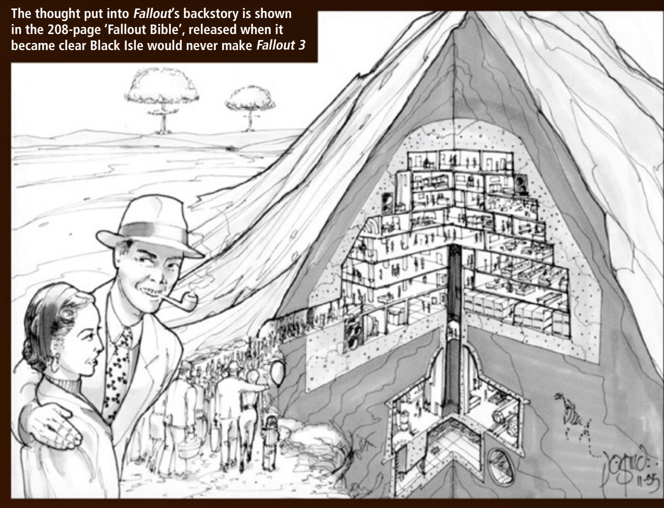
The quality of *Fallout*'s voice acting was far ahead of the graphical standard of its few-and-far-between animated conversation sequences



Narcotics range from intelligence-boosting Mentats to radiation-curing Rad Away to Psycho, a speed-heroin mix. They can all get you hooked



The thought put into *Fallout*'s backstory is shown in the 208-page 'Fallout Bible', released when it became clear Black Isle would never make *Fallout 3*



survival – and crucially, that means that *Fallout*'s story can end in failure. The game's original tight 150-day time limit was later lifted with an optional patch because it restricted players' ability to discover the wasteland, but there was something poetically brutal about it – it forced you to prioritise, and put the horrible consequences for wasting time in Junktown or taking a detour to rescue a city full of ghouls firmly on the player's shoulders. *Fallout* always forces you to live with your own consequences. Kill the town vendor over a dispute, and you can't buy anything ever again. Start a gunfight in a bar or a town, and people will remember. You can turn an entire town hostile with a misplaced word or bullet. Failure and death are stark facts of reality, and their omnipresence in the wasteland greatly contributes to the believability of the gameworld.

This insistence on making you live with your own consequences led to censorship in Europe. The presence of children in the game had unpleasant moral implications given the game's violence and choice-dependent ethos, so they were taken out entirely to remove the option of murdering them. Rather than compromise its realism by making children invincible, as Bethesda opted to for *Fallout 3*, *Fallout* offers up unique and terrible consequences for killing kids. It would earn you the word 'Childkiller' emblazoned indelibly on your character's stat screen, and that reputation would ruin NPC interaction and eventually send a squad of bounty hunters into the wasteland after you; even in the amoral wasteland, child killers are reviled. Regardless, though, the option was there, testament to *Fallout*'s commitment to choice and narrative consistency.

Black Isle employed many emergent storytelling techniques in common with Bethesda, of course, which made the developer a good match for the *Fallout* series upon its resurrection in 2008. But in *Fallout 3* Bethesda does, in the end, let you become a superhero, with stats and skills coming out your ears – at which point it immediately stops being so affecting. In *Fallout*, you never stop being a victim of the wasteland, and you can never control it. It's always a struggle. In fact, the game frequently lets you get yourself into situations you can't escape, leaving you to either die of radiation poisoning in the middle of the wasteland or resort, exasperated, to a previous savegame.

Perhaps being completely uncompromising is the price that has to be paid for presenting a world as cohesive and believable as this one, in which so many stories rise spontaneously to the surface. *Fallout*'s vision is epitomised in the ending image, in which the Vault Dweller is seen alone and stumbling – not striding, but stumbling, shoulders hunched, head down – into the sunset, exiled by the unbearable weight of his experience. There's no reward for bravery. Not in *Fallout*'s world.



GALLOWS HUMOUR

One of *Fallout*'s most memorable elements is the Vault Dweller's tenacious canine companion, Dogmeat, named after Mel Gibson's dog in Mad Max. Using bits of Iguana-on-a-stick and a one-sleeved leather jacket, he can be enticed to join the player's party, and having done so will fight tirelessly against even the most mismatched super-mutant foes.

Keeping Dogmeat alive became a sub-game in itself for many players. In yet another example of *Fallout*'s cruelty, he's a useful fighter at the start of the game, but it's nearly impossible for the mutt to survive the ending. Losing him could well be the game's most emotionally challenging moment.





Vault Boy is the ever-grinning face of Cold War paranoia, a Vault-Tec mascot that provides humorous illustrations for every stat and perk in the game



DIFFERENT DECISION
DIFFERENT GAME

AGGRESSIVE

STE

hmv
hmv.com

Out Now



PS3™
PlayStation 3



NEGOTIATE
IGNORE
EALTH
HEAVY RAIN
THE GAME IS JUST THE START
A serial killer is on the loose, a city is paralysed with fear and the police are running out of leads. You play all four lead characters in a ground breaking new game, where your decisions affect the plot. Every action has an unexpected reaction. Every decision has a consequence. Every choice has a price. Start an entirely new way of gaming, only on PlayStation®3.
youtube.com/heavyrain
PS3
HEAVY RAIN
15
SONY
make.believe



THE MAKING OF...
GITAROO MAN

Experimental jazz, BB King, PaRappa The Rapper and Steve Vai: just a few of the influences in the dazzling debut game from iNiS

FORMAT: **PLAYSTATION 2** PUBLISHER: **KOEI** DEVELOPER: **INIS** ORIGIN: **JAPAN** RELEASE: **2001**

At a time when rhythm-action games are largely differentiated by the numbers in their names, it's easy to forget that the genre has traditionally been one of the least conventional. A rockstar fantasy can take many forms – the romantic aspirations of a rapping dog, an anthropomorphic lamb's urge to prove herself with the power of rock, a squad of male cheerleaders and their benevolent efforts to motivate people. In *Gitaroo Man*, it's the sugar-high hallucinations of a little boy with a talking dog who comes into possession of a magic instrument that turns him into a mixture of Gundam robot and musical superhero.

Gitaroo Man was not the first guitar game – that distinction belongs to *GuitarFreaks*, and *UmJammer Lammy* predates it as well – but it was the first to concentrate on melody rather than rhythm, structuring its stages as epic instrumental battles between the player and an increasingly insane sequence of fiendish, costumed rivals from a bee-suited trumpet virtuoso to a trio of percussion-obsessed skeletons. It was made by a team of 15, led by Jazz Studies graduate and passionate saxophonist **Keiichi Yano**, who formed developer iNiS along with his wife, her brother and one other artist in 1996.



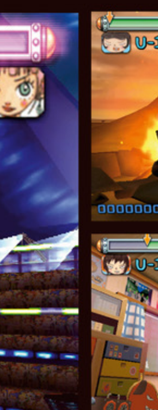
Gitaroo Man's unique interface was the first element of the title to emerge during its development – figuring out how to work it into a game was iNiS's chief challenge

"Games like Parappa and Beatmania were focused on the rhythm, but I wanted to create a game that focused on the melody"

It was a while before Yano found a way to integrate his studio's ideas into a workable videogame. At first, iNiS created music software and utilities, but game development was always an eventual objective. "The idea for *Gitaroo Man* didn't come to me until two years later, when the company felt like it could take a first step into games," he explains. "I had seen a movie, Crossroads, that featured this insane guitar battle against the devil, who was played by Steve Vai. I thought the concept of a musical battle was really interesting, especially because I am a jazz musician myself and I understand the fun of improvisational music battles."

It's that unique structure that makes *Gitaroo Man* quite unlike other rhythm-action games. NanaOn-Sha's gently insane creations were a great influence, most noticeably in the colourful madness of its presentation and madcap storyline, but the method of play is entirely different, focused on melody and intoxicating call-and-response musical patterns rather than beatmatching. "When we set out to design *Gitaroo Man*, I had it in mind that I wanted to fundamentally change how music games were played at the time," Yano explains. He cheerfully acknowledges Masaya Matsuura's spiritual contribution to iNiS's work: "There is no denying that I might not have been doing this if it weren't for *Parappa The Rapper*, and I have a great respect for Matsuura-san to this day." But NanaOn-Sha's gameplay style wasn't something that iNiS was seeking to emulate. "Games like *Parappa* and *Beatmania* were focused on the rhythm, but I wanted to create a game that focused on the melody of songs,







Japanese pop artist 326's character designs, with their Mojo King Bees and UFO robots, work together with iNiS's surreal and creative music to make *Gitaroo Man* nothing if not aesthetically distinctive. There's never been another game that looks quite like it

LIVING LEGEND

Gitaroo Man **has enjoyed two minor resurgences in popularity since its original release. Koei reprinted the game two years after its North American release in response to its unexpected cult popularity abroad, a move that greatly angered copy-hoarding collectors. It was then re-released on PSP in 2005 as *Gitaroo Man Lives!*, ostensibly thanks to the success of iNiS's other handheld game, *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan!* – although *Guitar Hero*'s ongoing propulsion of rhythm-action games into mainstream popularity might have had something to do with it, too. *Gitaroo Man Lives!* is almost entirely identical to the PS2 original, with the small addition of two new duet tracks in multiplayer.**



because I think you recognise a song that you like more by its melodies and harmonies than its rhythms," Yano says. "And since we wanted to tell a passionate story, I think that the inherent short story that is told through a good melody fits well with that."

***Gitaroo Man*'s story** is uplifting, bonkers and even redemptive, guiding young hero U-1 on an intergalactic journey of self-discovery punctuated by some of the best original music ever to feature in a videogame (original *Gitaroo Man* soundtrack CDs still regularly fetch eyebrow-raising Ebay prices). It's also varied, throwing U-1 into completely inexplicable situations with every new level; one moment he's dodging a giant space-shark while drum-and-bass blares from the speakers, then the space-shark turns into a robot and begins assaulting the senses with bizarre electro-reggae. "We were initially planning on doing ten stages and we were looking for the hook that would glue all of these disparate songs together," Yano explains, accounting for *Gitaroo Man*'s delightful structural randomness.

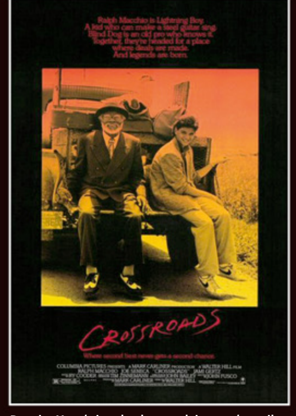
Once iNiS earned Koei's backing to work on a music game, the development process was brutally quick. While working with the publisher on a separate project, iNiS gained the support of staff within its audio department, and *Gitaroo Man* rapidly emerged as a game concept. "We developed the entire game from start to finish in a record ten months," Yano says. "Needless to say, it was a gruelling ten months, but I'm glad we released the game when we did."

The game went through considerable changes in that short time, too, as the developer's small team struggled to integrate its ideas into a workable structure. "The first time we got the prototype for the gameplay mechanic working was a monumental moment for us," Yano remembers. "We had the demo that we'd originally showed Koei, but the final game turned out really different, and we were trying to find the right balance of gameplay and revolutionary interface. We didn't have answers to those questions for several months and the team really started to get worried about whether we could produce a game at all. But when the prototype actually got up and running, people were excited. Heck, I was excited!"

> "The first time we got the prototype for the gameplay mechanic working was a monumental moment for us"

Koei kept a close eye on the project throughout its development, which Yano recalls as a mixed blessing: "It was good and tough at the same time. We had never developed a console game up to that point, but we had technical expertise. We didn't have an army of developers, just 15 people spanning everything from programming to art and sound. Whenever we were late, [Koei staff] would come to our offices and hang out there just to see whether we were working diligently enough. They had every right to be worried but sometimes they would just hang out until the early hours of the morning to make sure that we'd do the same!"

Despite Yano's extensive musical background – he has been playing the saxophone for 28 years, and occasionally performs with his various bands at gigs around Tokyo – he was not *Gitaroo Man*'s lead composer. Each track was recorded by either his stepbrother Tomohiro Harada or the Japanese rock band COIL. "Some songs were done by each team in a vacuum, but others they collaborated on," Yano recalls.



Despite Yano's jazz background, it wasn't until he saw the 1986 film Crossroads that it occurred to him musical sparring might work as a game



Gitaroo Man's multiplayer, in which one player takes up U-1's guitar part and the other plays a musical counterpoint, lays a foundation for musical battling that modern guitar games have yet to better



"For example, Bee Jam Blues was a joint effort, and I played the Bee part with my EWI [electric wind instrument] as well." Now we know who to blame for those endless evenings trying to dodge Mojo King B's infernal jazz solos on Master mode. "The songs were all crafted to maximise the game design, so we had to keep the composition very close to us. In the end, I really like all of the songs that we produced for the game and I'm proud of the guys for what they accomplished."

The game's excellent soundtrack incorporates a vast range of influences. Its various stages are designed around different musical genres, from operatic metal to brain-frying hyperactive J-pop, campfire acoustic folk, weird, loopy electronica and, of course, jazz, Yano's personal musical passion. "We selected the types of songs that we wanted to do first and then designed the characters to match the genres of music," Yano explains. "We would have long brainstorming sessions where we would listen to tons of music and pick up things we liked – sometimes when we picked songs we also talked about the story and the kind of characters that could be the bosses for that song. I don't quite remember how we got a lot of these zany ideas but it sure was fun! One was based on the name of a very famous saxophonist – David Sanborn. And voila! The Sanbone Trio was born. In Japanese the pronunciation is the same for Sanborn and Sanbone, which means 'three bones'."

The character designs were the result of a collaboration with the Japanese artist Mitsuru Nakamura, more popularly known as 326. "He was very popular at the time in Japan and we wanted to give our game some extra credibility and an original style with flair," Yano asserts. "When we first approached him about doing a music game, he was very excited at the possibilities. His first couple of designs were all used in the game and it wasn't long before we had all of the major characters in place. 326 has a great musical sense, having worked with bands in the past doing music videos and album covers, and I think he understood our groove right away. He was really fun to work with and inspirational for the project."

Gitaroo Man is a deft synthesis of inspired soundtrack, eye-catching visual design and innovative, intuitive interface, but it's perhaps the unexpected emotional impact that makes it so memorable. "We knew from the get-go that it would be a story of passion, love and growing up," Yano says. "I think the first game of any company is monumental, and its success, or lack thereof, influences our thinking in more ways that can be explained… What is most important is that we are proud of what we accomplished to this day, and the principles of trying to create new ways to experience music interactively still hold true for us."



CROWD PLEASER

Try to recall a *Gitaroo Man* tune, and The Legendary Theme is likely to spring to mind – a triumphant, air-punching riff that punctuates various significant points in the storyline, the recurring motif in *Gitaroo Man*'s epic rock opera. "To this day, I'm still really happy with how The Legendary Theme turned out in terms of how it played an important role in developing the end of the storyline," Yano says. "The exposition there worked really well and it's a formula I try to incorporate in my games even today." Unfortunately it was absent from the excellent multiplayer mode; the call-and-response nature of *Gitaroo Man*'s songs makes them perfect for two-person rock showdowns, but The Legendary Theme lacked a counterpart for the opposing player to control.

REGION SPECIFIC: NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands is a wonderfully contradictory nation. Stereotypically, it's an arty, flowery enclave between the more steely and dominant Germany and staid, respectable Belgium. It's a country of laid-back liberals, loafing about in coffee shops. But this is also the land that's spent 400 years trading with the rest of the planet, a vital cultural, geographic and technological hub at the gateway to continental Europe. The Dutch consider themselves entrepreneurs and risk-takers, and just as the nation's seafarers led global exploration in the 17th century, its media innovators are now key experimenters in the field of interactive entertainment.

Here, you'll find myriad independent studios pushing the boundaries of what we define as games, from the stylish virtual worlds crafted by Little Chicken to the snappy Flash-based advergames of WeirdBeard and the entertaining medical simulations built in a prison building by Grendel Games. And, of course, there's the giant that is Guerrilla, the developer that has proved intrinsic to Sony's selling of PlayStation 3 as a technical leader in this generation.

But the focus of the industry is changing. The model is shifting from triple-A megagames to digitally distributed, socially connected crossplatform experiences, and the smart money may well be on the Netherlands to dominate this emerging sector. Of course, technological mastery might not fit with the popular stereotype, but there you go. Asked what he'd like **Edge** readers to know about Dutch developers, **Ivo Wubbels**, co-founder of veteran studio Engine Software, replies: "We don't wear wooden shoes."









LOW COUNTRY AIMING HIGH

How game development in the Netherlands is taking on the world, and winning

Spend a couple of days exploring the Dutch game development landscape and one thing becomes clear: they do things differently. While the US and UK are choc-a-block with identikit mid-sized studios belting out desperate *Modern Warfare* and *God Of War* beaters, there's little genre ambulance-chasing going on in the Netherlands. Instead, small firms such as Triangle Studios, Ronimo, WeirdBeard and Monobanda populate the emerging arenas: augmented reality, advergames, serious and social games. If there's a new concept in cross-platform interactive entertainment, a Dutch studio's been working in the field for years.

"I think part of it's born out of necessity," says **Peter Hofstede**, game director at Dutch online gaming giant Spil Games. "It's traditionally been quite hard to get a big development studio off the ground here – it's expensive, there's been a lack of skilled people in this area, and it's not really part of our culture to kickstart that kind of project. But it's quite easy if you go into advergames. You need one programmer, an artist and a client, and you're in business – you just roll from one project to another."

"It's quite easy if you go into advergames. You need one programmer, an artist and a client, and you're in business – you just roll from one project to another"

In some ways, of course, the development community here has been waiting for this era for 20 years. After all, the country's videogame production history is dominated by the late '80s and early '90s demo scene, when groups of coders and hackers combined to produce cool audio visual showpieces on the Amiga, PC and Atari ST. Indeed, two of the biggest contemporary studios out there – Guerrilla and Engine Software – emerged from this underground collective. So really, small-scale, unorthodox experimentation is in the bloodline of the industry here.





But there's another reason why Dutch studios are flourishing in fresh entertainment niches. This is a country that embraces change and welcomes new ideas. It has always had to, because European history has dictated it. Consequently, the Netherlands has become a thriving centre of media experimentation, a testbed for offbeat concepts. It's here that billionaire magnate John de Mol created and tweaked such franchises as Deal Or No Deal, 1 Vs 100 and Big Brother, before they were distributed across the world. As **Jeroen Elfferich**, CEO at Ex Machina points out: "Holland is a great country to pilot new ideas, Dutch media consumers are quite savvy about using the internet and mobile phones… and if you screw something up during the pilot stage, you can still correct it before it goes to the big markets that actually matter. If you screw up in Germany, France or the UK, the damage is a lot worse!"

Connected to this is the Netherlands' worldwide reputation for liberality, which has also contributed to the region's growth as a centre of both productivity and creativity. The fact that most of the major advertising agencies have their big offices in Amsterdam has a little to do with centrality, but is much more because this is a cool place to hang out. The Netherlands is a nerve centre of design brilliance, from the bleeding edge architecture of MVRDV and Mecanoo to today's most omnipotent consumer technology – Bas Ording, a leading user interface designer at Apple, graduated from the interaction design course at the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Utrecht (HKU) in 1997.

On that subject, those looking to study game development are well catered for here. Educational establishments including the HKU, NHL Hogeschool, Hogeschool van Amsterdam and NHTV offer a diverse range of courses, from hardcore C++ coding to experimental game design, while the state-of-the-art Gameship facility in Leeuwarden provides local students with incredible access to motion-capture, music and video equipment. "The universities don't train people in a narrow way," says Hofstede. "People are not afraid to speak their mind and creativity is something that's valued. We've hired game designers from non-gaming fields – journalists,









for example, from photography. It's possible to find people with wide interests and a good understanding of what's fun, and what target audiences actually find fun, instead of being focused on what *they* believe are great games."

This is a philosophy that permeates the Dutch industry: a willingness to meet the demands of a new generation of gamers. As Hofstede argues: "It's the ability to innovate in business models, not just in content. To steer away from the classic core gaming blockbuster model and to move into the online space. The quality has been very strong in casual, and I think the reason behind that is that we're willing to create content that a big part of the world actually wants, and not necessarily the content that we as developers would like to build ourselves. We have the ability to see that and act on that."

There's an admirable amount of governmental support for the games industry, at national and local levels. A regional stimulation program named Pieken in de Delta (peaks in the delta) funds the Dutch Game Garden, an incubator for startup games companies looking for cheap office space and support. Meanwhile, the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs runs the three-year Dutch Games Go Global initiative, which helps developers expand into the US and Japanese markets. On a more modest scale, there's the WWIK, a form of income support aimed at struggling young artists, aiding them financially while they pursue their ambitions. That this is open to game designers shows there's a real understanding here that games are a valid cultural phenomenon.

As several developers were keen to point out during our whistlestop tour, the Dutch have been doing business with the world since Holland's golden age of ship building 400 years ago. For a country delicately positioned amid the competing forces of continental Europe, international trade and diplomacy have always proved vital, and this gregariousness permeates the games industry. "Because we're very small, we're historically used to being internationally focused," says **Jan-Pieter van Seventer**, strategy director at the Dutch Game Garden. "English is spoken well, we're centrally located and we're used to being the humble little guy knocking on doors."









"We're willing to create content that a big part of the world actually wants, and not necessarily the content that we as developers would like to build"

Hans van den Dool, manager of the Dutch Games Go Global programme, concurs: "The companies and people are physically close to each other, so there's a quick interchange of information – there's no time lost! People bump into each other socially – it's that fantastic Dutch infrastructure! We *are* a hub, we're traders by nature."

Killzone is certainly the dominant international success story of the contemporary Dutch games industry, but it's not alone. Spil Games, founded in 2001 and now the world's largest provider of online casual games, has offices in China and Poland. Meanwhile, the elder statesmen of the Dutch scene, Engine Software and Playlogic, have been quietly strengthening international links over the last decade. Indeed, even Triangle Studios, a company of barely 15 people with an average age of 25, is on the verge of setting up a US office, as is ambitious middleware provider Ex Machina. And, of course, the universities have forged links, exchange programmes and joint projects with other institutions all over the globe. Finally, the overriding impression is of a country where people just get along.

During our roundtable discussion, one of the points that kept coming up is that there's a generally affable, respectful air to the industry here. Although there are hubs of development across the country, from Leeuwarden in the north to Breda on the Belgian border, it feels like a community, and you're never far from the action. As **Remco de Rooij**, CEO at Triangle Studios, puts it: "The cool thing is, Holland only takes three hours to drive across, so if you want to head to Amsterdam on a Friday night, just get one of your friends to drive and go – you can be back by six in the morning!"



DUTCH MASTERS

The Netherlands, as is pointed out to us several times during our stay here, is a little country, with a relatively small development community. Which is perhaps why, as participants saunter into the meeting room at Playlogic's swish offices in Amsterdam's World Trade Centre, everyone chats warmly. There are few introductions – most of these men know each other of old; at least that's how it appears. The Dutch are generally so amiable that it's hard to tell.

But then, when the discussion starts, **Rogier Smit** and **Dominique Morel** from Playlogic, **Andrew Paquette** and **Ronny Franken** from Breda's NHTV university, **Frank van Oirschot** from the Dutch Games Association, **Jan-Pieter van Seventer** from Dutch Game Garden, **Hans van den Dool** from the Ministry of Economic Affairs, **Ard Bonewald** from RealGames, **Seth van der Meer** from the NLGD Foundation, **Peter Hofstede** from Spil Games and **Ivo Wubbels** from Engine Software, are happy to get stuck in. This is a small industry, but everyone here passionately believes it's on the verge of making it big.

Let's start with the obvious question – what's great about game development in the Netherlands?
Frank van Oirschot: We're innovative and flexible in how we work. We're good at collaborating in teams where IT, design and strategy disciplines come together. We have a tradition of inventing things and just trying things out, which you see in the games space.
Rogier Smit: It's interesting that when we started publishing in 2002, there were only a few companies developing games, but it's really taken off, especially in the last five years. There have also been a lot of new initiatives like NLGD (see p143). In general, there's a strong sense of entrepreneurship; people are willing to take risks and start creating and publishing games.
Andrew Paquette: Coming from America, all it takes is the right people in the right environment, and from what I see at NHTV, the students are often every bit as good as the professionals I've worked with at Sony and Universal and other companies in the States. The environment here is quite conducive to the kind of growth you would need to support the industry.
Jan-Pieter van Seventer: I think we have a unique mix. The schools, companies and government – those three working together is leading to a lot of quick cross-sectional solutions to accelerate the industry. One thing that helps is that we are geographically small here – so, as a country, all the little hubs are still really close to one another, within a few hours' travelling. There's a lot of working together, and a good integration between education and companies.
AP: Yeah, it works just like that at our school – one of the more shocking things I saw, coming from America, was how closely businesses and the government and the schools cooperated – it would have been illegal in the States actually, but it works really well.
Hans van den Dool: The government, in particular, is helping the sector, especially through infrastructure – the broadband penetration in the Netherlands is one of the highest in the world. SURFnet, which is an international scientific exchange, is located in Amsterdam – it enhances the infrastructure for IT and gaming companies.
AP: Actually, Dutch culture is more cooperative than anything I'm used to seeing in the States.
RS: Really? [Laughs]
AP: Maybe you guys feel competitive with each other, but even just walking into the room here and seeing how many of you already knew each other, from all these different companies – I don't see that in America. It's much more aggressive, in a way that I can imagine inhibits growth.
Ard Bonewald: But I think the Dutch are quite outspoken – they're very direct. I think that's good, because no good idea is left behind.
Peter Hofstede: Or bad idea unspoken!
AB: Exactly, but we're used to it – we get everything out on the table. That helps a lot.
JPvS: Historically, if you look at game development, the two biggest disciplines are technology and art, and in both we have a good history – we have a big fine art history, which you can see, even in *Killzone*. Then we have technology, there's a lot of innovation here. What's happening now is we're bringing those disciplines together – so schools of art and schools of technology are



With their international outlook, the game designers of the Netherlands feel the industry may finally be coming round to their way of thinking

working together. Some schools are integrating entirely, the government is helping with a lot of programmes to encourage knowledge transfer between different schools.
RS: Regarding education, we have a studio in Breda with about 80 employees, and it was a real problem for us to attract people, so we employed a lot of international staff. And that's one of the reasons I had a visit from the mayor of Breda about four or five years ago. I said to him, I get all these emails from kids who want to get into games, and get an education in games, so why don't we start a games school in Breda, a bachelor course taught in English, so that students can come here from abroad? He was really excited; we did a feasibility study and two years later, the school was there. It shows how quickly things can go in Holland, a whole institute set up after one conversation.
AB: I don't actually think there's a single Dutch games company that doesn't take interns from schools. That helps a lot. Every company allows a student to come over and work there and gain experience. I had a hard time explaining to Americans what these people are coming over to do!
AP: Internships are very rare in America. My policy when I was an art director at Universal was no interns. Period. I wouldn't let it happen.
RS: Why? They're motivated, they don't cost a lot…
AP: The thing is, I never saw anybody with a college degree who was worth hiring. But the people we have at our school *are*, and I'd be willing to fire some guys I used to pay $100,000 a year to in order to hire some of our students. That's because we're teaching them well.
RS: On *Fairytale Fights*, some of the better levels were developed by interns, guys who were playing *LittleBigPlanet* and really brought that into the game.
JPvS: *My Horse And Me*, the first Dutch Wii game by W!Games, was produced by a total number of 35 people, of which 12 were fresh graduates, and of these, four were interns.
AP: In the US, most schools don't hire pros to teach, because of the various degree requirements – most game pros don't have the qualifications, or they get paid too much to be willing. But here, there's a huge focus on needing to have people with current industry experience, and that makes a big difference.
FvO: One of the things we're seeing with new areas like casual games, serious games, XBLA and PSN, is that you have to be more effective and flexible. With these smaller projects, we're able to compete against the rest of the world. I think that the blockbuster business, as you have it in the US and Japan, has been difficult for us. We don't have that many highly specialised people, but we have a lot of people who can make good games with original IP and nice artwork, that exhibit qualities different from those that the classic big studios have brought to market. And we're able to do that with smaller budgets, for smaller platforms – that's what sets us apart.
AP: It's a huge opportunity – an incredibly large amount of unclaimed territory. When I was at GDC a couple of years ago, it was amazing how many corporate clients were running around begging developers to work for them – they couldn't explain what they needed and the developers who listened weren't willing to do it, and I'm sitting there thinking that's a great big gap to fill and a lot of money to earn. I ran into Coca Cola, Exxon and Hilton Hotels all looking for developers, and they couldn't find any because the developers were all looking for the one-strike killer games.

In Canada, for example, the game industry is being boosted by an array of tax breaks and other initiatives – how are videogame developers in the Netherlands being helped by the government?
RS: We get a tax break on technology and innovation, called WBSO [Act for the Promotion of Research and Development]. You pay less tax on salaries, too. I think the willingness is there…
Seth van der Meer: The big difference between Canada and Holland is that here, the government is *supporting* business instead of providing tax breaks or subsidies for one-off projects. They're bringing in money to go to GDC, to Tokyo, to Cologne. And it's working: initiatives have been spun off, the industry has been growing up, and this has led to the formation of the Dutch Games Association. Also there's an incubator – the Dutch Game Garden –

which Jan-Pieter is running, and we have our festival of games which is very focused on doing business – matchmaking and dealmaking – rather than just hoping a couple of products succeed with a lot of government money.
JPvS: I think the way the government works is, instead of giving money, they prefer to take away obstacles.
AP: I actually really prefer this to the American method of going into incredible debt to give everyone money so they don't go out of business. I think that ultimately, [the Dutch] strategy will pay off, even if it takes a while.
FvO: But in the end, that's not the reason to come here, because the subsidies and support in other countries are much more than in the Netherlands. What you can see from other creative industries







is that the atmosphere and the availability of creative people are the main reasons to come here. If you look to advertising, there are a lot of high-profile advertising agencies based in the Netherlands – I think the top five don't even have one Dutch customer, it's just the fact of being around here, attracting international people. If you're looking for high-class people and a nice environment to make excellent productions, whether it's in gaming, advertising or UI design, then you can see that Holland has a strong position.
AP: One thing I consider to be a real asset of Dutch culture is tolerance. It makes it a friendlier place, a more stable society, and I think for people coming in from other countries, it's unique in that way. I've never run into a place that was as friendly as this. My wife and I came here 25 years ago on a tour of Europe, we went through England and France and Belgium, and we got to Holland, and our intention was just to continue to Germany and all these other places, but we thought: 'This is a really friendly place,' and we got an apartment! We had to go back to the US because we were just kids then, but we always wanted to come back – and we did. So for the last 20 years we've wanted to live in Holland!
JPvS: I've heard some Americans call the Netherlands 'user-friendly'…
AP: This is a fact about the culture, it's very tolerant, friendly and conducive to business. It's a kind of neutral attitude that you almost have to have if you intend to succeed. And if sufficient effort is applied using that to the advantage of the games industry, it can't help but flourish.
JPvS: I think also the nature of game development is cross-disciplinary, and I think the Dutch are so used to being cross-everything anyway…
AP: Cross-dressing…
JPvS: They're used to connecting the dots, and

"My wife and I came here 25 years ago on a tour of Europe. We thought: 'This is a really friendly place', and we got an apartment!"

I think that's so much in the nature of game development. The whole success of a game company rests on its ability to combine all the different disciplines, especially when you have a big product with 50 or more people.
PH: It's easy here to find a programmer who can also do a little bit of game design and maybe even look after his own deadlines – it's definitely easier than with some of the outsource companies that we work with.
AB: And for some reason we're not bothered by hierarchy that much. Sometimes it's difficult, but I think it helps a lot in being innovative and creative.
AP: There's less of a threat involved in interactions between colleagues. In America it's not so much like being in shark-infested waters as being eaten by sharks in shark-infested waters. Here I don't feel like that at all – I can talk to anyone in a company without worrying about whether my career's going to be jeopardised for suggesting something that's not popular. And when I look at the way that the students interact, the way they behave in teams, it's bizarre. I feel like this is a Star Trek episode, I've gone to a different planet and these are the people who know how to cooperate – and I come from the planet where they don't. Even people who hate each other cooperate and get things done.
AB: You have to realise that in the Netherlands it's very safe as an employee – if you lose your job you're taken care of very well by the government, so you don't have the fear of losing your job.
JPvS: I got laid off once while working for a company in the US. On the Monday morning I just went into a meeting and a half hour later I was out of work – that's impossible here. [Dutch labour laws require an employer to ask permission for an official 'reorganisation' to downsize its staff – a lengthy and complex process.]
RS: Unfortunately! I like the American system better – really. I've been an employer for ten years now and people can abuse it – it's very easy for someone to call in sick and you can't do anything about it. And as an employer, we have to pay.

How else do you think the working environment differs in the Netherlands?
Ivo Wubbels: Well, in America they work ten hours a day…
AP: Ten? Are you kidding? Those are the sissies! Real men go 18, 20…
IW: But they do less than a Dutch guy does in eight hours.
AP: It depends on which Dutch guy. Look, the people I've got – they are better than people in America – even people with several years' experience, but they are identical to the people who do well in America, their personalities are the same, their attitude is the same, they don't worry so much about what is expected of them by other people but what they expect from themselves. And I think that some types of environment don't allow that to blossom – in your case [to Rogier] you're talking about people who stagnate because they're not encouraged to go further, to crave work. In America you're pushed so hard to do that, it's expected for you to be there until midnight every single day. When I was on *Space Jam*, I had to do a minimum of 15 hours every day for





in casual gaming and serious gaming – that the quality is improving, and the effect of that is that more people will be interested in coming to work on projects here because it'll be good for their career, it'll be good for their CV, and it'll be interesting for them. We're now able to show to the world that in the Netherlands, there are more and more companies, with more successful games – we need to get the message out there, then they'll come.

Dominique Morel: There are lots of reasons to work with a Dutch developer, but the main one is communication. Not just in terms of language, but also the welcoming approach of 'OK, I'm here to listen to your ideas'. Being a production director at Playlogic, I've been working with Russian, French, Italian, Polish and Spanish teams… But here, when we work with the Dutch team we know we're going

independent developers. If I could find them all in Holland, I would buy them all here.

AB: Same here!

PH: There's a wave of students being released next year…

JPvS: And what we're seeing is that they're not just looking for jobs, they're creating jobs. There are six or seven developers that started less than three years ago, and they're already hiring people. That's interesting because everyone was saying: 'Hey, aren't we turning out too many students? Who's going to hire them?' Well in fact, they're already hiring people themselves, like Ronimo. There are a lot of global opportunities, I don't think the market is saturated, because in the business scene, a lot of companies are catching on to using games for all sorts of other things, rather than just entertainment. There's a really

seven days a week for the whole project – that kills people.

IW: I've worked with a lot of partners in the US and I've seen how it works there. We are way more efficient. They often say Dutch guys have factor three speed – we work three times faster than they do.

How would you sell the Netherlands to the world as a game development centre?

AP: One thing I've noticed is that I haven't run into a single person here who enjoys wasting money. And that attitude forces an extra level of reflection on all the decisions, and often improves the quality of those decisions. When I worked at a developer in the US, they bought absolutely everything that was for sale, at whatever price, and they hired everyone who applied, then just worked out the details later. It was outrageously expensive.

JPvS: You mean the Dutch are more frugal?

AP: Yes, but it works in lots of different ways. In America, you would just walk down the hall, grab everyone who was nearby and say we're going to have a meeting right now. And you'd have a meeting that didn't have an agenda that lasts for a long time – that's hours that are spent that weren't accounted for on any budget. Here, you have a schedule and you have an agenda, everyone knows what it is and it's over when it's supposed to be over. You spend exactly what you allocated to it – you don't see that in America.

FvO: I think one of the things we'd like to get across about game development in the Netherlands is: challenge us with whatever you think is difficult to do yourself.

Hans van den Doel: Go to the Dutch to solve your problems!

RS: I think we're beginning to show through more releases on various platforms – on PS3 and Xbox 360,

to be understood, and when we attend a meeting we know it'll be organised, we will be welcomed and they will be ready to listen to us. It's a real relief.

PH: Because of the fact that almost no-one in the world speaks Dutch, we always have to deal at least in English. For us, it's very easy to go into local markets and to work with outsourced developers, but also to tune products so they fit with local markets. Within Spil, that's one of our core values.

SvdM: We have a very healthy business atmosphere, I think, because of our trading background, but also because we have a very small home market. We always have to look outwards, we're always focused on getting revenues in as soon as possible, instead of getting venture capital in as soon as possible, so we concentrate on making money rather than burning other people's cash.

AP: It reminds me of the early days of Japan's dominance of a number of creative markets. They had a supportive environment 30 or 40 years ago – they had the keiretsu structure in their businesses that enabled people to learn their industry and then start projecting their products. Here, we have a government and a number of other institutions that are supportive of industry. The climate is similar. It might be a different scale, but it's similar.

JPvS: I think I see two things to sell: innovation and technology. In recent years I've seen a lot of innovation in gameplay – games like *Swords & Soldiers*, *Rocket Riot*, *Overlord* – they're just a little different from what we're used to. *De Blob* is a good example. I think there's going to be lot more innovation in gameplay becoming visible over the next couple of years.

But can this country support so many young studios? Is there enough work?

PH: This year, we'll buy around 300 games from

strong business-to-business gaming element now.

DM: I've learned a lot from the entrepreneurial approach of Dutch people. There are quite a lot of companies here that start with just one or two people. They've very much been trained to set up their network and go out and succeed – there's nothing like that in France. It's very slow.

JPvS: Also, getting an education here is relatively cheap for the students, which means they don't leave university with huge debts. In the US I know that's a big deal, in the UK, too. There's also an income supplement here called WWIK, it provides arts students with living expenses so they can get started as artists. A lot of them use it to make games. That helps. I studied in the US and paid US tuition fees.

AP: And you're still alive!

JPvS: The pressure forces you to start looking for a job rather than start your own company.

AP: But here you have several years during which you have the subsidised ability to do what you want. Often, you're better off going with your own ideas, and ultimately, that's going to have a result.

Do you think studios in the Netherlands are good at promoting themselves?

PH: Did you know about Spil Games?

HvdD: We are not good advertisers of ourselves.

JPvS: That's one thing the Americans are better at – telling everyone how great they are. I think that's a good thing, actually. I feel the Dutch have a problem with modesty. As soon as one company says: 'We're the greatest,' everyone else says: 'Shut up, get down!' Actually, when I think about it, there are either companies that are extremely arrogant, or they're way too humble – there doesn't seem to be a whole lot in between. The Dutch need to learn to promote themselves in a nice way, with a wink.

SvdM: We talked about the Dutch being good

cooperators and the only way to cooperate is not to have people running around gloating. What's been going on in the last couple of years is that we organise ourselves, we go abroad to trade fairs, we have our own festivals. In that way, together, we're starting to promote ourselves – that's the best way forward, to show people what's different here, instead of having a couple of arrogant companies disrupting the whole tradition of working together.

Out of all the Dutch studios we've visited, only a tiny percentage have PR staff.
Ronny Franken: I think a lot of Dutch companies have started with just a programmer and an artist – there's nothing commercial going on…
JPvS: You're looking at team DNA – usually a studio is founded on friendship, and friendship is made in college, it's who you were at school with. If you're doing art, you're not at school with marketers. One of the challenges we've seen at Dutch Game Garden is trying to get these schools together in the second, third and fourth years, so that the friendships are cross-disciplinary before the company starts.
FvO: We have to be realistic, because if we were that bad at marketing and PR, then we wouldn't have the biggest casual gaming company in the world in the Netherlands.
AB: I think casual gaming companies need more PR, not towards customers, but towards students. Most students go out and want to build the next big epic adventure shooter. But there's a whole range of casual games and I find it a great place to work.
AP: I would like to get our students interested in simulations as well. I was speaking to someone from the Landmacht [the Dutch army] and she told me they had 7,000 jobs in simulations alone – that's one organisation in Holland.
FvO: What are they doing – simulating World War III?
RS: I didn't even know we had an army!
AP: Maybe because they stick with simulations…
RS: We have a simulated army!

What's going to shape the industry over the next few years?
AP: We're getting a lot of people from places like Lithuania, Ukraine and Germany coming to us, telling me they want to start their own game studio here or they want to go and work for Playlogic or Guerrilla, and they want to stay here. And they're good enough to. You only need 15 to 20 people to do it, and we're going to be sending out teams of that size pretty fast every single year, and there are other schools that are doing the same thing.
RS: In our studio in Breda, we've been prototyping on the Sony motion controller. And digital is a big part of our future strategy – DLC, full games – the market has changed to that already, and it'll grow. Digital has potential, because there are relatively low costs involved, quicker time to market, easier to market – I don't have to deal with distributors who don't pay – it's a more direct and straightforward business model. And I think there will be a lot more developers starting up: the entry barrier is lower, the investment is smaller and the revenues can be generated – Sony pays, Microsoft will always pay, you don't deal with a distributor, and price erosion at retail is becoming a real issue for publishers, retailers and distributors. I think distributors are going to have a tough time over the coming years.
JPvS: The Dutch are really going to benefit from the new digital distribution channels. We're going to see a lot of startups in the next couple of years. The small casual companies are all jumping to consoles by way of the Wii right now, which is, with WiiWare, the most accessible console to develop for. Holland has had an explosion from zero GameCube developers to 15 Wii developers. Those are all companies that traditionally made online 3D games – like *Little Chicken* – web-based games and advergames. A lot of those companies are jumping to the Wii.
RS: If I showed you guys the GfK sales figures on Wii titles in general, I think you'd be very scared.
JPvS: That's not my point. The point is the expertise of working on a console, doing submissions and getting approved by a technical team other than your friends – the jump to that kind of expertise has made a lot of companies grow up fast.
AP: Personally, I'd love to see a completely open console, kind of like the old TV sets where everyone had the same technology.
JPvS: It's called the internet!
FvO: What our company wants to do is really bridge over into television. We think we have a lot of great Dutch television companies, format owners – Who Wants To Be A Millionaire, Deal Or No Deal, Big Brother, numerous international formats. As a games firm, it's our mission to cooperate with TV companies and bring that kind of IP to the television screen and then have people play along on their mobile phone or laptop. There are a lot of companies in Holland looking into that area.
AB: And gaming is more acceptable now – people are going to look at it as a way to interact with their friends – that's where the social gaming comes in, but I think it's going to go much further than just a game on Facebook.

If we can finish Twitter-style, how about one quick sentence on the Dutch game development landscape as it exists today?
RS: The Netherlands is an innovative and creative melting pot!
HvdD: And you are welcome here!
JPvS: I think we can become first because we used to be last. We have the advantage of being late with videogame professionalism. Education has been able to start completely new schools with completely different approaches – if you started a game programme 15 years ago it was a lot harder to get resources – there's so much more available now. I started teaching in 2003, and I found four articles online – The Cabal by Ken Birdwell and a few others. Now you can order hundreds of books, there's so much more theory available that we in Holland have benefited from. In our school, we're less bound by traditional programmes that are having trouble catching up with new developments.
AP: So there's your one sentence!
JPvS: [Laughs] OK, I'll go with: I think we can become first because we used to be last! 

Photography: **Mark van Wengen**



"Gaming is more acceptable now – people look at it as a way to interact with their friends – that's where the social gaming comes in"


TASKFORCE
INNOVATIE
REGIO
UTRECHT
DUTCH
GAME
DEVELOPMENT
CENTER
GARDEN



AND REACH NEW HEIGHTS

as

Senior/ Lead Character Animator,
Senior/ Lead 3D Artist,
Experienced Development Manager

or

Senior Design/ Internal Producer

send your resume to

HR@PLAYLOGICINT.COM

Playlogic International N.V.
World Trade Centre, C-Tower 10th Floor
Strawinskylaan 1041, 1077 XX Amsterdam, The Netherlands
E info@playlogicint.com, P +31 20 676 03 04, F +31 20 673 17 13

Playlogic Game Factory B.V.
Hambroeklaan 1, 4822 ZZ Breda,
The Netherlands, P +31 (0)76 544 68 45





PLAYLOGIC

Both a publisher and developer, Playlogic is one of the largest game companies in the Netherlands

- **NAME:** Playlogic Entertainment
- **LOCATION:** Breda/Amsterdam
- **FOUNDED:** 2002
- **EMPLOYEES:** 110
- **URL:** www.playlogicgames.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Fairytale Fights, Obscure: The Aftermath, Infernal: Hell's Vengeance, Worldshift, Age Of Pirates* series



Playlogic's Amsterdam offices are convenient for international travel, while its development studio is based in nearby Breda





Interview: Rogier Smit

Executive vice president

Formed by entrepreneurial father and son team Willem and **Rogier Smit**, Playlogic is one of the emerging giants of the Dutch games industry. Boasting its own large development studio in Breda, this global multi-platform publisher has deals with studios all over the world, and is pushing its way into the top flight, an ambition aided by a partnership with SCEE to provide games for the PlayStation Eye. But what are the challenges facing a burgeoning publisher in this tumultuous market?

So, why become a game publisher?

Both my father and I saw the growth of the games industry, we saw how quickly it was expanding and thought we'd try to get a piece of that pie! It's not easy to be a publisher, it's a tough industry, but we've demonstrated that perseverance does pay off.

What do you think have been your key titles?

Fairytale Fights is our biggest project to date – we hit all the milestones, we made the retail dates, which is very important. And the PlayStation Eye and EyeToy have been important to us in our firstparty relationship with Sony, which is ongoing.

How did the EyeToy deal come about?

It was one of those things – being in the right place at the right time, meeting the right person, with the right idea. It started out with a project that was never released – *Wizard Of Funk*, this was back in 2004/5. Sony said they wanted publishers to focus on three things: localised content, like the *Club Football* series that Codemasters did; online for PS2, because Xbox Live was more successful; and EyeToy, which was hugely successful via *EyeToy Play 1* and *2*, but had barely any software. Our game was a light RPG – we used hand- and motion-tracking for turn-based combat. I showed it to Sony at E3 and they loved the concept. We got going on it, but then Phil Harrison said they wanted to focus Eye development on their own brands. By then, however, we'd shown what we could do so we moved on to PS3, working initially on prototypes for about a year, then we did *Aqua Vita* [*Aquatopia* in the US] which is still the number one selling Eye game in the States. Then we did *Tori-Emaki* and *Mesmerize*, which are all Eye experiences for download. Then we moved on to *EyePet*. We've released five products in less than four years and all have been successful. The fact that we're producing firstparty games says a lot about the quality of the titles and the ability of the programmers, technically.

What is Breda like as a place to work?

It's nice, it's a very relaxed environment – it doesn't have a big city feel. Everything is very centralised, there are a lot of local restaurants and bars, and we have the school of game architecture and design. It's a great breeding ground for fresh industry talent.

What's good about being a publisher in the Netherlands?

It's very accessible. Amsterdam airport is a five-minute drive from our office there, and everyone speaks good English in the Netherlands. As the only publisher here, if we want people with experience we have to recruit internationally. And because everyone speaks English it's easier to adapt, you don't have to learn a language to do your shopping.





Fairytale Fights is an Unreal Engine 3-based hack'n'slash adventure in which players try to regain the lost fame of fairytale characters using a variety of deadly weapons



REGION SPECIFIC

GUERRILLA GAMES

A change of direction led to Guerrilla Games becoming the Netherlands' highest profile game developer



Formed by merging three separate Dutch developers, this Amsterdam-based outfit was previously known as Lost Boys Games, reflecting its position as a subsidiary of Lost Boys. Subsequently sold to Media Republic and given its current moniker, Guerrilla Games finally made a serious splash with PS2 title *Killzone*. Following a key role at Sony's unveiling of the PlayStation 3 in 2005, Guerrilla's position was further strengthened through a buyout by the Japanese giant later that year.



Based in this grand Amsterdam townhouse, Guerrilla Games shot to prominence on the back of *Killzone*'s success on PS2 in late 2004

- **NAME:** Guerrilla BV
- **LOCATION:** Amsterdam
- **FOUNDED:** 2000
- **EMPLOYEES:** 140
- **URL:** www.guerrilla-games.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Killzone*, *Killzone 2*, *Shellshock: 'Nam 67*

Interview: Hermen Hulst

Co-founder, MD

***Killzone* seemed to represent a quantum leap for the studio. What led to that sea change?**
We'd made a few Game Boy and Game Boy Advance games, created *Shellshock: Nam '67* for Eidos, and worked on the preproduction of *Killzone* for SCEE. But we realised that we were spreading ourselves too thin, so we decided to focus on one of the things we're best at: creating games that really push the hardware. *Killzone* was the most suitable project to put our resources in.

***Killzone* was a technically advanced game – how did you gain an edge over rival studios?**
Many of our programmers hailed from the demo scene. Their low-level programming abilities were extremely useful when it came to squeezing every last bit of performance out of the target hardware.

***Killzone 2* was one of the most important titles on PS3 last year – what did that game teach you about PS3 development?**
It taught us how to develop for the console, but also how to offload various tasks onto the Cell architecture's synergistic processing elements in order to optimise performance. We're satisfied that we demonstrated the potential of the hardware but we realise that further optimisations are always possible and that we haven't hit the limit yet.

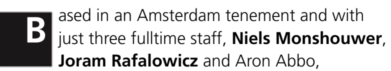
What do you make of the rest of the game development scene in the Netherlands?
The interesting thing is that while it mostly consists of smaller development teams, those teams have learned to use their size and flexibility to their advantage, by taking on multiple smaller projects.

Studio profile



WEIRDBEARD GAMES

The studio behind 99 Bricks has console ambitions



Based in an Amsterdam tenement and with just three fulltime staff, **Niels Monshouwer**, **Joram Rafalowicz** and Aron Abbo, WeirdBeard is symbolic of the Dutch games industry's boutique approach. The studio is gaining a reputation with Flash-based advergames, but now has its own IP and ambitions to tackle platforms such as iPhone and console downloads. Not bad for a trio who had no game design experience until three years ago.



WeirdBeard only has three fulltime staff but has worked for clients including the Dutch ABN Amro bank, and theme park Walibi World

- **NAME:** WeirdBeard Games
- **LOCATION:** Amsterdam
- **FOUNDED:** 2007
- **EMPLOYEES:** 5
- **URL:** www.weirdbeard.nl
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *99 Bricks*, *Gotham City Rush*

Interview: Niels Monshouwer Joram Rafalowicz



Co founder, MD



Co-founder, TD

What have been some of your key games so far?
NM: *99 Bricks* has been our biggest success. It was nominated for a Dutch Games Award last year. It's a physics-based game that looks like *Tetris*, but instead of getting rid of the lines, you build a tower. We're looking to get it on other platforms such as iPhone or consoles. Last year we won a contest to make a game for a Batman animated series, The Brave And The Bold. It was called *Gotham City Rush*, a fast-paced action platformer.

What's the Flash market like at the moment?
NM: Every day there are many new games, so it's easy to get lost in the crowd. But when you make a good game, it's appreciated. Because the games are smaller, you have a shorter production time and can experiment with new types of gameplay.

How would you sum up your approach to game development?
NM: We take well-known concepts and give them an innovative twist. People want instant satisfaction, you have to grab their attention immediately, otherwise they'll escape.
JR: A lot of Flash games are just rattled out, [their developers] don't put any effort into making them look better than needed. We try to provide the complete package, with user-focused design and high production values.

Who are you working with?
JR: We're doing some minigames for a web-based MMOG. We can't say who's releasing it, but it's a Dutch firm.

What comes next?
NM: The next stage is to build more of our own IP and discover new platforms.



Studio profile



LITTLE CHICKEN GAME COMPANY

The online game developer relishes its guinea pig role




Co-founder ■ Co-founder ■

Interview: Michiel Sala Senne de Jong

Co-founded by **Michiel Sala** and **Senne de Jong** ten years ago, the Little Chicken Game Company has become a leading player in the advergame market, creating innovative web-based 3D titles for the likes of BMW, Gillette and Adidas. Through its mastery of the flexible Virtools rapid development engine, the studio produces 15 games a year and is now branching out into virtual worlds, social connectivity and console development, but the focus on small development teams is set to remain.



Little Chicken offers original content in a market dominated by licensed and recycled content, and aims for console quality online

What are you currently working on at Little Chicken?
MS: We're expanding in different ways. Advergames is an interesting business but we're also just starting, with another company, to create what's hopefully going to be the next big thing on Facebook, let's say a casual MMOG. We like to test the boundaries – with Flash, for example, to see how far can we go in 3D. We are trying to create true 3D game experiences in Flash, and trying to find how far we can take this with the available technology.

How has the game design environment changed?
MS: It's not about simple games with the high score tables any more. The big lifestyle brands want full virtual worlds. We made a virtual world for a big theme park in the Netherlands and one of its primary goals is to be a safe environment for children online. We're also working with Pritt. They wanted to do something with gaming and children. So we made a small virtual world where visitors can play and create characters, and [the visual design] is fully handcrafted. We're currently implementing games in it. Pritt is committed to take this all the way, to connect players to their products but also focus on adding value for the players online and off by offering virtual and real life rewards. In a way, we're a form of communication, but also a business experiment tool – that's exactly where we want to be.

What sort of programmers are you looking for?
SdJ: We need the sort of people who don't get stuck on any problems. When they encounter a problem, they need to walk around it – it's as simple as that.

- **NAME:** Little Chicken Game Company
- **LOCATION:** Amsterdam
- **FOUNDED:** 2001
- **EMPLOYEES:** 22
- **URL:** www.littlechicken.nl
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** Projects for BMW, Shell and Handicraft World

Studio profile



EX MACHINA

This Amsterdam studio provides infrastructure for realtime games linked to live TV shows



CEO ■

Interview: Jeroen Elfferich

Back in the '90s, **Jeroen Elfferich** and Frank van Oirschot ran a successful business building websites for big corporations. But then the dotcom crash hit, so in 2001, the duo set up Ex Machina to explore the emerging world of online gaming. The company now provides its unique cross-platform multiplayer technology to a range of clients, from game developers to multinational broadcast networks. Indeed, the future of interactive TV may rest with this small studio in the heart of Amsterdam.



Ex Machina is a small company with lofty ambitions. Its key goal is to create games that you can play from anywhere at any time

Who's buying and using your multiplayer infrastructure?
One of the things we've done quite often is work with TV companies, take a game show and turn it into a quiz game for the web, mobile and other platforms. We've worked with the public broadcaster here and most of the commercial broadcasters. We've developed the ability to make a synchronous link between the show being broadcast and the game that you're playing at home – so what's happening in the game is directly related to what you see on TV and vice versa. Think about a massively multiplayer Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? where everybody pays to get in and at the end one person gets the jackpot. Of course you'll strive to be the best in the country, but what's probably the most exciting is, is my IQ higher than my brother's? Am I better at solving riddles than my partner?

Won't this become impossibly complex on an international level?
A big part of our technology is not just the core engine, it's the whole web-based management interface that comes with it. So suppose you have the Eurovision Song Contest, you can have people participate and interact in their own language, and they can do it at the same time as people from different nations. It's not all we do, but we're excited about this potential link between linear and interactive media.

America is the biggest market for online gaming and interactive TV – do you have any plans there?
We've found some really good people working on this kind of technology for the US market, so we can hit the ground running. We're setting up an office in San Francisco, and as more of a long-term ambition, we also want to do this in Asia.

- **NAME:** Ex Machina
- **LOCATION:** Amsterdam; San Francisco, California
- **FOUNDED:** 2001
- **EMPLOYEES:** 20
- **URL:** www.exmachinagames.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** Projects for major Dutch broadcasters





The first game using our Motion Tilt Technology



now in development for Nintendo DSiWare™

Nintendo DSiWare is a trademark of Nintendo

























ENGINE SOFTWARE

The handheld game specialist has worked with some of the world's most well-known and respected brands



Interview: Ivo Wubbels



Co-founder

Engine Software's roots can be traced back to a team of hobbyists initially involved with the country's fledgling demo scene, before progressing to game development for the MSX console in the early '90s. Three members from that group – **Ivo Wubbels**, Ruud van de Moosdyk and Jeroen Schmitz – created Engine Software in 1995. Since then, the company has ecome something of a handheld specialist, developing middleware, as well as its own original and licence-based titles.





Engine Software has built up an impressive reputation, following licence-based work for Nintendo, Mattel, Disney and Warner Brothers, and the success of its own Nintendo Pulse Sound System

How did you end up tackling games *and* middleware development for Nintendo?
We've always had a really good working relationship with Nintendo, but it was only in 2009 that we added our Pulse technology to the official Nintendo middleware program. Before that, we kept Nintendo informed of what we were doing but didn't directly work with them on middleware. The number of games that use Pulse is countless and over 45 handheld developers have licensed, and are using, the technology.

You've a good reputation when it comes to licensed property…
Early on, we were looking for assignments and got the opportunity to work on some licensed titles on Game Boy Color. Since we even handled tough licenses well, it became a matter of reputation. It's an on-going process: publishers feel confident that we can create games with licensed material, and the licensor is confident we'll treat their licences with care. We've worked with toys, cartoon characters, movie licenses and comic book characters. We know how to create games suited to the target audience, we handle clients' wishes well and respect the material. A lot of studios develop the game they want to develop; Engine Software develops the game for the audience.

Why do you think Dutch developers gravitate to the casual/mobile/downloadable sector?
It's mostly financial – they're cheaper to make. I don't think the Dutch are necessarily better at creating casual games than hardcore ones, as proven by great games such as *Overlord*, *Killzone*, *Chronicles Of Spellborn*, and, recently, *Killzone 2*.

- **NAME:** Engine Software
- **LOCATION:** Doetinchem
- **FOUNDED:** 1995
- **EMPLOYEES:** 24
- **URL:** www.engine-software.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Challenge Of The Warlords, Just Sing!*



SONICPICNIC

This small studio provides a complete audio service for creatives, developing both in-game sounds and music

Interview: Yorick Goldewijk





Co-founder

Though manned by just four people, SonicPicnic operates out of two cities – Utrecht and Rotterdam – and services film and TV outlets as well as the burgeoning local games industry. In a field where composers tend to work alone and where music and sound design tend to be viewed as two different disciplines, the decision to open a studio offering a one-stop audio solution has proved to be a wise one.



Based in Utrecht, SonicPicnic's music composition and sound design clients include such Dutch firms as Codeglue, Two Tribes and Ronimo

You're in the interesting position of serving the game industry while also writing for film and broadcast projects. How did this come about?
At the very beginning of SonicPicnic, we focused mainly on film and TV, but we've always enjoyed gaming and did some minor games-based music projects at school. Eventually we decided to explore gaming further, and stepped into a world of enthusiastic, fresh and varied people. With the rise of online services such as XBLA and WiiWare, the development of original games became more feasible for small developers here in the Netherlands.

Game audio is a unique discipline. Has it been easy to adapt?
One thing we really like is that game projects enable us to combine the key elements of SonicPicnic, since we do music composition, sound design, audio post-production and voice castings and recordings. We like to involve ourselves in the project on a more conceptual level, instead of just handing over the audio.

Has it been as creatively fulfilling?
Yes. Good in-game music now has a more nuanced function, placing the current situation in context within the overall experience, or exposing the character's state of mind. It could match the emotional depth of a good film score, and yet have more impact, since a player actively participates. This principle perhaps applies even more on sound design, since it's experienced less consciously than visuals by most people. Because the emotional mechanics of sound aren't as obvious, their impact can be more impressive. There are challenges, though, because it often requires cutting away, looping, and compressing sound more than you feel comfortable with.

- **NAME:** SonicPicnic
- **LOCATION:** Utrecht; Rotterdam
- **FOUNDED:** 2002
- **EMPLOYEES:** 4
- **URL:** www.sonicpicnic.nl
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Rocket Riot, Swords & Soldiers*



U-TRAX

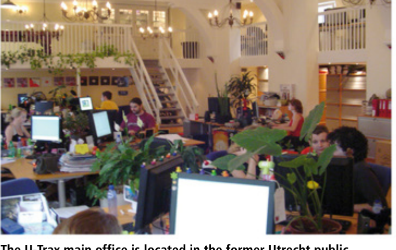
Bringing famous games to non-English speakers



Interview: Richard van der Giessen

President and owner

Originally set up as a record label, U-Trax is now a key videogame localisation firm. It translates manuals and onscreen information and re-records in-game speech into a variety of European tongues. Once based in founder **Richard van der Giessen**'s kitchen, the company has grown rapidly over the last decade and now handles pan-European localisation for big hitters such as Sony, Activision and Ubisoft. As for the future, Europe's not the only continent with non-English speakers…


The U-Trax main office is located in the former Utrecht public library, right opposite the city's landmark cathedral ('de Dom')

- **NAME:** U-Trax
- **LOCATION:** Utrecht
- **FOUNDED:** 1997
- **EMPLOYEES:** 40
- **URL:** www.utrax.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Heavy Rain, Uncharted 2, Assassin's Creed 2*

How did you practically corner this market in northern Europe?
We did everything: onscreen translations, audio script translations, audio recordings. And then we kept getting emails from American publishers saying, "Hey, you guys are close to Norway aren't you?" From their perspective we *are* close. Linguistically, we're similar to Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. So in 2003, we did all the international documentation for Nintendo. A year later we got a big Dutch client called Zylom, (the casual games provider, now part of RealGames). That was a big break for us because we got into other languages – French, Italian, German, Spanish and also Portuguese.

How many customers do you have?
It's around 40. Sony is a big client – we handled *Infamous*, *LittleBigPlanet*, *Gran Turismo 5*, *Uncharted*. We do a lot for Ubisoft, we test all their casual games – we have these grown-up guys playing *Imagine: Live Your Dreams*!

What do you look for in translators and localisation testers?
Our testers all come from the specific territories. They need to be good in their own language, good in English and good at gaming. Then we fly them over, give them an apartment and they live here for a couple of months.

How important do you think localisation is becoming as games increase in sophistication?
It's nice and convenient to play in your own language, but the voice-acting has to be very good, because suddenly you hear everything, every nuance, and the game becomes close to you, you really feel it. This is what localisation does. And there's only one way to do it: perfectly.

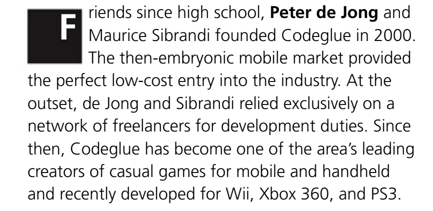


CODEGLUE

The Rotterdam-based mobile and handheld game developer reveals its key mantra: always innovate

Interview: Peter de Jong

Co-founder and CEO



Friends since high school, **Peter de Jong** and Maurice Sibrandi founded Codeglue in 2000. The then-embryonic mobile market provided the perfect low-cost entry into the industry. At the outset, de Jong and Sibrandi relied exclusively on a network of freelancers for development duties. Since then, Codeglue has become one of the area's leading creators of casual games for mobile and handheld and recently developed for Wii, Xbox 360, and PS3.


Codeglue has converted titles such as *Lemmings, Worms World Party, Monkey Ball* and *Slap Happy* for mobile platforms. It also developed *Rocket Riot*, its own Xbox Live game, released last year



- **NAME:** Codeglue
- **LOCATION:** Rotterdam
- **FOUNDED:** 2000
- **EMPLOYEES:** 10
- **URL:** www.codeglue.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Rocket Riot*

What would you say is your philosophy at Codeglue?
We always want to do something new. It's OK to look towards other games for inspiration but we need to make sure people know they're playing a Codeglue game and not a copy of game *X*. The most important elements are gameplay, controls that are easy to pick up, a sense of humour and a unique visual style. We always try to innovate on at least one of those in every game we make, but they all need to be present to make a good game.

What are your thoughts on the current state of the casual and Xbox Live Arcade market?
I think bigger productions will be a trend for a platform like XBLA. If you look at the production value of recent games, it's pretty high. But XBLA isn't as accessible for small developers any more. When we started developing our XBLA game *Rocket Riot*, we managed to get a publishing window from Microsoft ourselves. Today, Microsoft is working more with publishers than with developers directly. We work with some major publishers, so it's not an issue for us, but for new developers with fresh IP, it's more difficult now.

Why do you think there's a trend for small development teams in the Netherlands?
A lot of universities started offering game design and technology courses, which has resulted in large numbers of students starting their own studios. Because mobile and digital download platforms have a low threshold to get your game published, a lot of small studios aim for these platforms. Traditionally, the Netherlands has had a strong creative industry. Think of Dutch design, which is known all around the world.



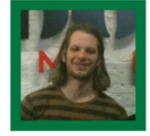


GAMESHIP

The modern multimedia studio puts Leeuwarden on the map



Senior advisor



Co-founder

Interview: Albert Sikkema Tim Laning

Several years ago, **Tim Laning** and **Albert Sikkema**, then lecturers at Leeuwarden's NHL university, wondered how they could turn the city into a hub for game companies. They planned a cutting-edge multimedia studio, packed with the latest motion capture, video, sound and animation facilities. With financial help from various bodies, the centre opened last year, with a development studio, state-of-the-art facilities for hire and programmes for local game design students.



Gameship's motion-capture suite can be used by students at the NHL university as well as hired by Dutch game developers

What was it that inspired you to set up Gameship?
AS: We ran a popular course in multimedia and game development at NHL. It attracted a lot of students, but we didn't have many companies working in multimedia or games in this area. We needed to have substantial economic activity based around these new media.
TL: We founded G-Ameland [see p143], started promoting the independent game companies we had in the region, and were lobbying for a facility like this to get all the knowledge to come here. A large percentage of students at NHL wanted to start their own companies and there are a lot of office buildings for rent. When you're creating games and other digital technologies you don't necessarily have to be next door to your consumer.
AS: And it's cheap to live here!

As well as hiring the facilities out, you have an in-house development team – what are they working on?
AS: We've finished three small projects so far: a first aid animation for training purposes, a video clip, and a 3D FPS demo game. At the moment, we're working on more serious projects: a fairytale animation series for TV, a virtual surgery room, a laparoscopy training application (with Grendel Games, see p135) and a healthy ageing project. The studio also has the CAREN [Computer Assisted Rehabilitation ENvironment] system for research in rehabilitation and sports.

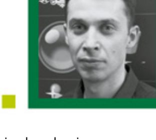
Can NHL students use the facilities?
AS: Yes, there are a lot of students involved with the projects – around 80 are working here at the moment. Some of them would like to practice motion capture or animation. Well, now they can do it here.

- **NAME:** Gameship
- **LOCATION:** Leeuwarden
- **FOUNDED:** 2009
- **EMPLOYEES:** 7
- **URL:** www.gameship.nl



SPIL GAMES

Despite its huge success, Spil Games wants to keep reinventing itself to stay at the top



Game director

Interview: Peter Hofstede

With 45 websites in 17 languages, Spil Games is one of the largest providers of browser-based games. Its top ten titles were played 350 million times in 2009. The company has its own development studios, which are responsible for more than 100 titles a year, and around 300 more are licensed from other developers. But with social networking reshaping casual gaming, this giant of the Flash scene is ready to expand again.



Spil has a portfolio of 4,000 free online games and attracts 115 million unique visitors to its localised gaming portals every month

Is it currently difficult to recruit programmers into casual game development?
It's getting easier. You see a lot of experienced console programmers who have been working on these really big projects that have failed to materialise, and they're fed up with that. It's more satisfying to go into a situation where you finish a product within two or three months and have a big impact on the outcome.

Also there's the spread of things like social gaming and Flash-based virtual worlds, it's a lot sexier now. Flash has become an arena for experimentation. If you look at the GDC over the years, there's been a big shift toward Flash

How is Spil Games adapting to make sure it stays at the top of its sector?
Moving forward, one thing that's going to be vital is developing an emotional connection with the user. It's about making sure the brand becomes more relevant and engaging to users through content and social features.

There's a big technological push to provide social-driven features to end-users and to create true communities, where people start using the gaming experience as a means of communication. We are strong believers in social gaming, and we are transforming our websites to reflect this. You'll see a lot more social features rolling out on them, and we're taking our content to other platforms and devices, such as the iPhone.

Big picture: we're transforming into a social casual gaming company, and we're using a multitude of platforms to get there.

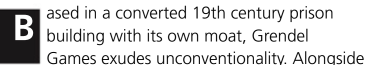
- **NAME:** Spil Games
- **LOCATION:** Hilversum
- **FOUNDED:** 2000
- **EMPLOYEES:** 200
- **URL:** www.spilgames.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Uphill Rush 2*

Studio profile

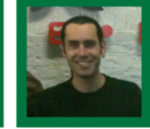


GRENDEL GAMES

Training lifesavers – do games get more serious than this?







Interview:
Tim Laning
Jan-Jaap Severs

Co-founder ■ Co-founder ■

Based in a converted 19th century prison building with its own moat, Grendel Games exudes unconventionality. Alongside familiar game projects such as fantasy brawler *Slave To The Blade*, the team creates simulation games for medical applications, including CAREN, a physical rehabilitation system; they're currently developing a training tool aimed at keyhole surgeons. It puts Grendel, quite literally, on the cutting edge of serious gaming.



Grendel Games is based in this striking building, a former prison complete with a moat. The firm primarily develops serious games

You're working on a game for keyhole surgeons. How did that come about?
TL: They're training on simulators that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the problem is, these simulators are not very efficient and they're sure as hell no fun to play. We're working together with University Medical Center Groningen to create an entertaining game that's actually a simulator. We're using the Nintendo Wii to do it. It enables surgeons to compete against each other.

So, is it like *Trauma Center*?
TL: No, that's the fun thing. It's more like *Lemmings* combined with *The Incredible Machine*. We're simulating the surgery, but you'd never know it.
JJS: The students have been in the operating room the entire day and they want to wind down and have some fun, and that's what we're going to offer – but they're also practising the physical actions of laparoscopy.

You also develop scenarios for the high-tech CAREN technology – is that a growth market for you?
TL: There are more people becoming elderly than there are younger people, and this costs society a lot of money. The kind of application we're building reduces the cost of therapy.

Do you still do conventional games, then?
TL: Yes, we just released *Diatomic* for Nintendo Wii, and we have a new game called *Equalised* coming on the iPhone which is a cool rhythm platformer. For now, we self-publish, but we'll be looking for publishers for some of our projects. The serious game stuff is our financial backbone, and with the money we make, we design games we want to play.

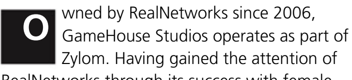
- **NAME:** Grendel Games
- **LOCATION:** Leeuwarden
- **FOUNDED:** 2003
- **EMPLOYEES:** 9
- **URL:** www.grendel-games.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Diatomic*, *Equalised*, *Slave To The Blade*

Studio profile



GAMEHOUSE STUDIOS

A studio that's all about emotion and experience rather than just technology

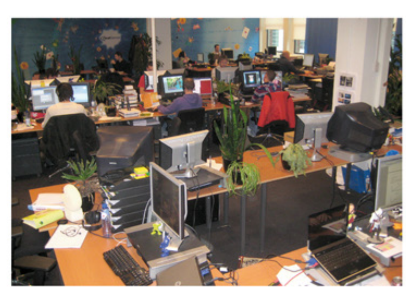




Interview:
Ard Bonewald

Director ■

Owned by RealNetworks since 2006, GameHouse Studios operates as part of Zylom. Having gained the attention of RealNetworks through its success with female-orientated casual gaming, Zylom now runs the biggest casual gaming site for women over the age of 20, developing games internally at GameHouse Studios as well as publishing titles from second- and thirdparty developers.



Though its main offices can be found in Eindhoven, Zylom delivers its casual, female-oriented games through 12 countries in Europe

How has Zylom changed since the buyout by RealNetworks?
While our focus on female gamers has remained, we've grown tremendously. The way we create games has changed over the years. We formed an international engine team by merging teams from the US and Europe, and now have global QA. In the beginning we created web and small games in three- to four-month periods, but now we focus on rich AAA casual games and our minimum development time is eight months. The game developers work pretty much independently for most of the development. But as soon as we have something worthy of testing, we contact our colleagues in the US. We regularly have contact among the studio leads and producers.

What skills have enabled you to tap into the female market so well?
It's all about emotion. Of course we're always trying to raise the bar to give our gamers rich new experiences, but we focus on emotion and experience rather than technology. We have an eye for detail and our strength lies in 2D art and creating story-based games – we try to get the player emotionally involved. For us it's about the right mix of gameplay and story. On top of well-balanced game mechanics, we build a very rich game world with smart and witty dialogue that our adult audience can appreciate.

Is there anything specific to your country's culture and heritage that gives Zylom and the GameHouse development team an edge?
In the Netherlands we have very strong technical, art and creative education. We have a way of working together and hearing each other out to reach common goals. It works well in an innovation-based industry.

- **NAME:** GameHouse Studios
- **LOCATION:** Eindhoven
- **FOUNDED:** 2001
- **EMPLOYEES:** 90
- **URL:** www.zylom.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Emily's Taste of Fame*, *Delicious – Emily's Holiday Season*, *Campfire Legends – The Hookman*

Studio profile





TRIANGLE STUDIOS

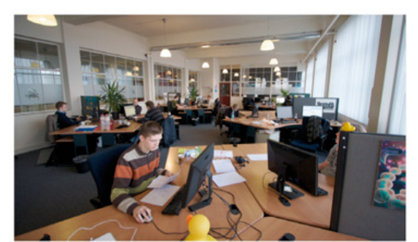
Having built up a reputation through its work for hire, Triangle is now increasingly working on its own games



Interview: Remco de Rooij

CEO

With a small, young team and a range of projects on the go, Triangle Studios typifies the Dutch development scene – innovative, quick-witted and open to new opportunities. Based in the northern city of Leeuwarden, the studio started out in mobile development, but then secured a DS developer licence, working mostly with Dutch TV shows. Last year, the studio released its first WiiWare title, *Heron: Steam Machine*, and is co-developing *Layar*, an augmented reality browser for iPhone.



Away from the bustle of the Netherlands' Randstad region, Triangle Studios has developed primarily for Nintendo DS, but has recently branched out to produce games for Wii and iPhone

What's good about being a developer in Leeuwarden?
Each year, 100 new students with the freshest ideas and experience with the newest technology graduate from the NHL university here. These guys want to start out in their local environment for three or four years before moving out into the rest of the world. Also, it's pretty cheap out here – and once you've been working for two or three years, other things become important, like how much time you spend in traffic; over here it's literally none.

Have you any plans for full-scale PS3 or Xbox 360 projects?
We're three or four years behind with the PS3 and Xbox 360 bandwagon. But we think we can still do pretty cool things on XBLA and PSN. I hope that we get the chance to step in early for the next generation. We want to be able to do multiplatform development, and we've proven with our first title that we can do it.

What's next for Triangle?
Until now we've been mostly involved with work for hire, but we want to create our own titles and stories. This coming GDC, we'll be at a point with our own game that we'll be saying to publishers: "Hey, come look at us".

Can you tell us about that game?
It's a cross between *Fable* and *Zelda*. We're writing the stories, creating the environments and will start developing soon. Our character is based on a legend that happened here in Friesland, about a guy who fought against the Saxons – they invaded this province and he kicked them out. It's a well-known story, similar to Braveheart. He wielded a sword that was two metres long and could chop off six heads with one blow.

- **NAME:** Triangle Studios
- **LOCATION:** Leeuwarden
- **FOUNDED:** 2006
- **EMPLOYEES:** 15
- **URL:** www.triangle-studios.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Heron: Steam Machine*, *Stratego: Next Edition*

University profile



NHTV

After lobbying from Dutch game firms, the country now has a course to educate budding game developers



Interview: Frank Peters

Director of the Academy for Digital Entertainment

NHTV has been in operation since 1966, originally focusing on the tourism and city planning, before introducing a new academy aimed at the digital entertainment sector. With two bachelor programmes (Media and Entertainment Management and Game Architecture and Design), 2010 will also see the addition of a masters in Media Innovation. This will offer highly focused curricula taught by game industry professionals.



The first intake of students on NHTV's Game Architecture and Design course will graduate soon. The university, based in central Breda, hopes to launch its new masters programme this summer

We understand that the game course was set up following lobbying from Playlogic.
One of the reasons for starting the course was that Playlogic had a hard time finding skilled staff, but the programme was set up with help of several other Dutch games companies, including Triumph Studios and Guerrilla. We hired industry veterans from all over the world, putting together a course to deliver cutting-edge artists and programmers.

Is it fair to say that the Dutch game industry hasn't historically been well served by universities?
Without wanting to criticise colleagues, the Netherlands has lacked programmes that focused on the needs of high-end PC and console developers. Game programmes tend to be broad, instead of focused. NHTV decided to educate specialists, such as animators, texture artists or AI coders, by offering specialisations early and having an individual specialisation year.

How did the GeorgiaTech link come about for the development of the new masters programme?
Hans Bouwknegt, our associate professor of digital media concepts, wrote a dissertation that fitted in well with Professor Jay Bolter's theoretical framework at GeorgiaTech. They jointly decided to develop a masters program that aims to make concept development procedural.

How successful are the courses?
We get 600 applicants every year for 120 spots. Internships are taken by all major companies in the Netherlands. Most of the time, interns get offered a job. We'll have our first graduates next summer and we're curious where they'll end up.

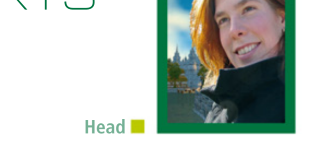
- **NAME:** NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences
- **LOCATION:** Breda, Netherlands
- **FOUNDED:** 1966
- **URL:** www.nhtv.nl

University profile

Utrecht School of the Arts

UTRECHT SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

A multidisciplinary approach to game design bears all the hallmarks of an innovative learning environment



Head

NAME: Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU) faculty of art, media and technology
LOCATION: Utrecht
ESTABLISHED: 1987
NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 3,700
URL: english.hku.nl

The Utrecht School of the Arts (HKU) faculty of art, media and technology boasts a unique approach to game education. Both an art school and a university of applied science, it founded the world's first interaction design course in 1991. Eight years later, it launched the country's first dedicated game design course: in its theatre department. Conventional courses do exist, but as evidenced by graduates forming radical indie studios such as Ronimo, the offbeat approach lives on.



Wii game *De Blob* came out of a project on urban redevelopment at HKU. The learning manifesto intimately links the methods of social interaction design and performance with gameplay principles

Interview: Dr Marinka Copier

Tell us about HKU's game courses.
We have one programme at the theatre faculty and three at the faculty of art media and technology: interaction design, game design and development and game art. Our focus is on developing new gameplay principles, and we have a very broad view on what games are. We design and make not only computer games but also board games, card games, performance-like games. That's our role – to research play and design methods. We also undertake a lot of development in which students learn programming and art. We use, for example, XNA, C++, Flash Maya and the Virtools 3D engine.

Why set up a game design course in the theatre school?
We think there are very important connections between performativity, narrativity and game design.

How closely do you work with the videogame industry?
Most of our faculty members work in the industry. Developers come in to look at work and provide assignments. In the third and fourth years, students do internships at studios around the world and work on industry projects. There's a lot of dialogue with the industry, so it's a form of research as well. We work with developers and educational establishments in Asia, the US and throughout Europe.

What have been some of your major successes?
The game *De Blob* started as a serious assignment from the City of Utrecht, to show how the urban environment will be redeveloped. Then it was sold to THQ, and the students decided to start a company, Ronimo Games. That entrepreneurship is something they learn from the first year on.

University profile



HOGESCHOOL VAN AMSTERDAM

A bastion of education that promotes practical expertise



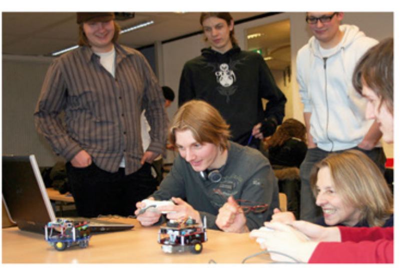


Head of dep · Lecturer · Advisor

NAME: Hogeschool van Amsterdam
LOCATION: Amsterdam
NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 30,000+
URL: www.hva.nl



With over 30,000 students and a campus that virtually constitutes a city, the Hogeschool van Amsterdam is one of the largest educational establishments in the country. Games programming has been taught there for several years, but in 2009 a dedicated bachelor's degree in game development was launched. Devised through close consultation with established developers, it's a highly practical course featuring two six-month internships with real studios.



The Hogeschool van Amsterdam mixes technology with creativity and business. The technology-driven curriculum has ties to game research and industry, for a state-of-the-art learning environment

Interview: Kees Rijsenbrij, Joris Dormans, Carla Hoekendijk

What practical elements does the course involve?
JD: Students build a lot of games over four years and we usually have a fair at the end of the project where they show off their games. We invite people from the industry to judge the games. It's something students are going to encounter in their professional lives.
KR: We're also building a game lab with 3D motion-capture capabilities.
CH: And now we've started with game production. We have industry guest speakers who visit every week. It's part of the necessary flow between industry and education – we have time to do research for them, while in turn they offer us additional experience.

What are the most interesting game projects you've seen?
JD: There's a 3D platform game called *Property,* where you control a ball with changeable physical properties – you can make it bouncy, heavy, or sticky – and based on the properties you choose, you can solve the various puzzles in different ways.

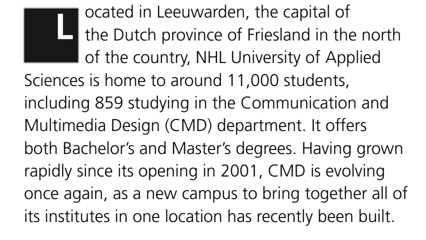
One of the key problems with game courses in the past is that they've been too general and lightweight. Have you learned from those criticisms?
KR: Yes. The first-year course focuses on computer science and mathematics.
JD: There's more programming in it than in the software engineering course! The students will follow one very technical course and one that's more design-focused, but they need to be accomplished programmers and software engineers. One of the first things I tell my students is: well, since you're here I can see you have a love for games; but you have to develop the love for *developing* games, which is completely different.

University profile

NHL
UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

NHL UNIVERSITY

This northern university provides a conveyor belt of talent for the local and national game industry





Interview: Harry Zengerink

Head of CMD, NHL

Located in Leeuwarden, the capital of the Dutch province of Friesland in the north of the country, NHL University of Applied Sciences is home to around 11,000 students, including 859 studying in the Communication and Multimedia Design (CMD) department. It offers both Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Having grown rapidly since its opening in 2001, CMD is evolving once again, as a new campus to bring together all of its institutes in one location has recently been built.



Students on the games courses at NHL University of Applied Sciences work on creating real games from the beginning. Many graduates go on to work for game developers in Leeuwarden

- **NAME:** NHL University of Applied Sciences
- **LOCATION:** Leeuwarden
- **FOUNDED:** 2001
- **EMPLOYEES:** 40
- **URL:** www.nhl.nl/cmd

What were your aims when establishing CMD's game courses?
Our key aim is to contribute to students' development, so that they can become game developers. Our students are creative and questioning. They want to work in the games industry or establish their own businesses. The second goal is to help Leeuwarden to explore this new creative industry.

Some students hail from other countries – what attracts them?
A number of German students have chosen Leeuwarden, and we're cooperating with Sweden, England, Germany, America and Japan, with plans to launch an international masters in Game Design. All our activities are constructed around the idea that the students are at the centre of the university. They study in communities of 42 students, working in groups of six or seven to gain high-level competencies and develop real games. Also, Dutch people are especially good at thinking outside the box. We're creative and accountable, so the Dutch industry is original in the way games are conceived and built.

What changes do you foresee in the future?
The games world will alter completely, as will the programmes here. I like to compare games with the film industry. Back in the 1920s, people were flabbergasted to see moving images, then decades later it became a billion-dollar industry. The games industry is still in its infancy, and will grow. Already, our courses are becoming more adult. We started with simple concepts and simple games. Now the students have become very creative, learning how to use rewards and penalties, and to tell stories.

Media profile

Control.

CONTROL

A magazine aimed at the more creative side of the game industry



Interview: Eric Bartelson



Editor-in-chief

Launched just under three years ago by publishing veterans Matthijs Dierckx-Kuijper and Eric Bartelson, Control has quickly become an integral part of the game development scene in the Netherlands. Focusing exclusively on the creative side of game creation and distributed free to industry professionals and students only, it supplements seven standard issues per year with a trio of international editions.



Covering serious games and the more intricate, creative side of gaming, Control has made a name for itself since its 2007 launch



- **NAME:** Control Magazine
- **LOCATION:** Utrecht
- **FOUNDED:** 2007
- **EMPLOYEES:** 8
- **URL:** www.control-online.nl

Why did you launch a magazine with a development focus?
As former colleagues from a publisher of gaming magazines, we felt the time was right to focus on the individuals and companies that actually make the games. Consumer magazines are all about the end product; we are more interested in the creative minds that create them. After getting positive feedback for a pilot issue we launched the first edition in November 2007.

What's your overview of the Dutch game industry at the moment?
With only a few large developers here, the majority of companies are small yet highly creative. This modest size means they have to be versatile and efficient. The difficulty is that smaller companies usually make smaller games, which compete on over-crowded platforms. It's getting increasingly hard to make money there.

Dutch developers seem to be particular strong in emerging areas such as serious gaming.
There are several reasons for this. The Dutch have always fought nature, the sea in particular, in an innovative and technically driven way. To a certain extent that forced us to come up with equally innovative and technically training methods. Hence, the evolution of what is now called serious gaming.

How important do you think support from universities and the government will prove?
The industry and universities need each other. New developers are needed and the only way to make sure they have the right skills is to get the dev community involved in their education. The Dutch government has some tax breaks in place but it's nowhere near the involvement of the Canadian or French government.

Event profile



G-AMELAND

A festival where students and pros create games together

NAME: G-Ameland
LOCATION: Ameland
FOUNDED: 2008
URL: www.g-ameland.nl

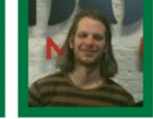
The island of Ameland, just off the north coast of the Netherlands, with a population less than 4,000, is possibly the last place you'd look for an international videogame festival. But since 2008, G-Ameland has been attracting hundreds of visitors and an array of industry insiders, all of whom must spend five days working together in small groups to create playable games. If there's anything that symbolises the offbeat, explorative spirit of the Dutch videogame scene, this is it.



Once Upon A Time In The Waste **was the winning game at last year's festival. Play online at at www.g-ameland.nl/dbfiles/download/101**

Interview: Albert Sikkema Tim Laning


Co-founder


Co-founder

Why does the world need another game festival, and why hold it on Ameland?
TL: Festivals like GDC used to be just for employees – you'd go there to gain knowledge and pick up a couple of tricks. But GDC slowly transformed into something aimed more towards networking, and the tutorials were more at a business level instead of game creation. So we thought, why not have the lectures here and have our companies and students there?
AS: A lot of developers like the idea. We spoke to Peter Molyneux in the autumn – he was in Holland and he was very excited by it, so we're trying to get him to the event this year.

Are the attendees mostly students from Dutch game design courses, or are there international visitors?
TL: We've had people from all over the world. And we match the students with established developers to make sure everyone gains knowledge from each other. It's particularly nice for companies from Holland to participate, because they get to meet their future interns. It's mutually beneficial. People tend to work very hard, day and night, on the project, and students have the opportunity to work directly with the developers who've inspired them.

Are you expecting more participants in 2010?
AS: The festival is steadily growing, from 100 students in 2008 to 300 in 2010, hopefully. We have a five-year plan which states that the festival will grow to 500 people.

Is there something about Ameland that aids the creative process?
TL: It's a remote location where you can really concentrate on building games.

Event profile



NLGD FESTIVAL OF GAMES

A festival that looks at the business side of making games

NAME: NLGD Foundation Festival of Games
LOCATION: Utrecht
FOUNDED: 2005
URL: www.festivalofgames.org

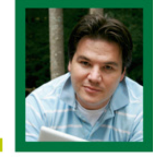


Founded in 2005, the government-funded NLGD Foundation (the aim is to be self-supporting in a few years' time) is responsible for the now internationally recognised Festival of Games. The Festival of Games 2010, running over June 3–4, has been designed to offer international appeal and focus on practical information for industry executives rather than those toiling at the coalface of game development.



This year's festival will be focusing on online development, online distribution, online marketing, online business models and online play, and anyone who wants to make a profit from digital games

Interview: Seth van der Meer


Chairman

What was the state of the Dutch game industry when you launched the NLGD Foundation?
At that time the local developers and researchers were scattered and barely aware of each other's existence, in other words: there wasn't really an industry to speak of. So our initial aim was to provide a public platform for game professionals, game researchers and students in the Netherlands.

How much has the formula been changed for this year's event?
After reviewing feedback from last year we've totally redefined the framework of the event. We've invited industry leaders like David Perry and Ian Livingstone to provide decision-making knowledge that managers can work with directly. The conference is less about far-fetched visions or the latest techniques in Maya or Unity, but instead focuses on topics like how choosing an engine or distribution platform determines how your company should be set up, or what type of investors you need to expand your game franchises worldwide.

You're in a unique position to comment on the game dev industry in the Netherlands – what's the current state of play?
In general it is growing fast compared to most other industries here. It grew from around 30 to 40 noticeable companies in 2005 to more than 100 in 2010. If you look at the rate they are producing quality games, there has been a tremendous uptake since 2006. Nevertheless, the recession affected companies that were depending on long-term financing or lacked the experience to actually manage a company. The only noticeable effect of the worldwide crisis has been the loss of Streamline Studios.



Strength through Unity

How a small group of Danish coders addressed the changing rules of middleware to create game-making tools for a new generation



Steffen Toksvig, development director, Unity Technologies



www.unity3d.com

Traditionally, videogame middleware has found itself tied to the console cycle. Providers were given early access to development kits to provide tools that eased the pain of developers grappling with new hardware. Publishers tended to make big technology decisions in the months before and after new boxes were released, and then stick with those decisions until the next switch. The overlapping and prolonged 360/PS3/Wii era has shattered such thinking, however. In addition, the rise of casual gaming has fragmented the scene even further, with web browsers, DS, iPhone and other mobile devices requiring support.

Perhaps the most radical change, though, has been the fragmentation of the people using middleware. It's no longer about professional developers working in C++. Instead, the curtain has fallen. Now, almost anyone can be a game developer, and middleware companies have had to move fast to be able to provide a broader userbase with tools to accomplish their goals.

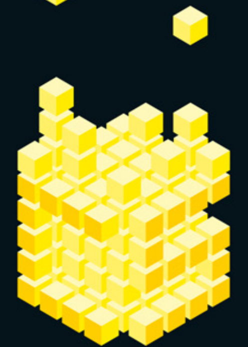
In such a situation, the players that have made the most of this newly opened opportunity are those arriving fresh from the left field.

One such is Copenhagen-based Unity Technologies. First released in 2005, its Unity3D engine was the product of three Danish programmers and the cream of the Lithuanian demoscene. More important than its geographic pedigree was its focus on web-based and browser games and its ease of use, enabled through a script-based integrated development environment.

This meant developers could open their Unity3D editor and be working on a live game, tweaking elements and then immediately checking them in-game without recompiling. Unity's fast, streaming webplayer also meant that users didn't have to wait ages to start playing games.

Of course, the technology wasn't without its issues. For one thing, until early 2009, you could only develop on it using Macs, massively limiting take-up in an environment dominated by Windows developers.

Since then, and combined with the rolling out of support for new platforms including iPhone and Wii, one of the



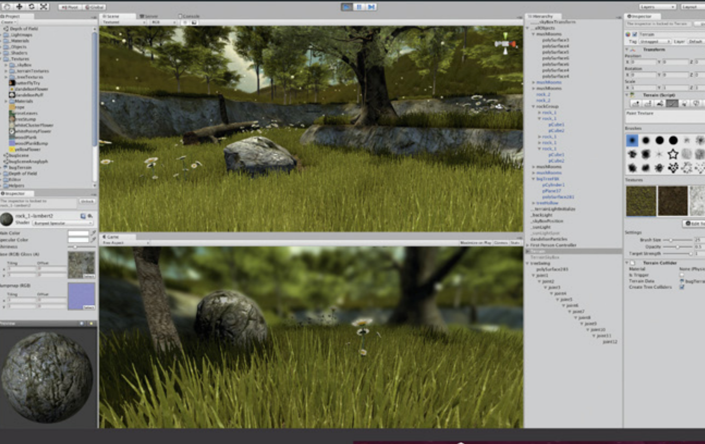


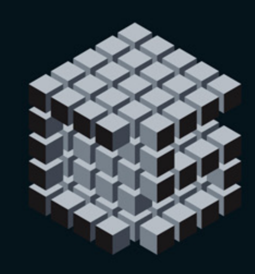




The iPhone version of Unity3D has proved to be a massive success, with a rapid rate of adoption. It's been used in over 500 games to date, including *Touch KO*, *Zombieville USA* and *Monster Trucks Nitro*







Despite being an easy-to-use system, based around C# and Javascript, with Unity3D you still have access to a lot of graphical power (left). The Lego Group is a big fan of Unity3D and has signed a three-year deal to standardise development using it, including titles such as *Lego Star Wars: The Quest For R2D2* (below left). Unity3D has also been used on Wii for Knowledge Adventures' Jumpstart virtual world, *JumpStart Pet Rescue* (below)





major issues for Unity has been dealing with the scale of its success.

It has over 100,000 registered users, ranging from companies such as Cartoon Network, Electronic Arts and even NASA all the way to bedroom coders. Lego has just signed a three-year strategic agreement to standardise its games using Unity3D, too.

It's such growing pains, both in terms of the company and the technology, that are the current focus for development director **Steffen Toksvig**. Himself a convert from the professional videogame industry, where he was CTO at *Hitman* developer IO Interactive, Toksvig says his first tasks have been as much about staffing as tech. "I've been here for ten months and in that time we've grown from 29 people to 65," he says. "A lot of my time was spent dealing with recruitment, and working out who would work well within the company."

This is a particular concern, since Unity has a distributed development team. The core work on the engine and editor is carried out in Copenhagen, but there are two offices in Lithuania handling graphics and support for handheld devices. To add to the mix, there are also individual coders in Amsterdam, Berlin and Brazil.

"We would prefer to have everyone based on one of our offices, but when you're looking for people with specific skills it's a different situation," Toksvig says. "We always get people to work in Copenhagen for a period."

As well as heavy use of online communication tools such as Skype, intranets, wikis and video conferencing, the other element that keeps Unity3D's programmers working in step is their use of Scrum techniques.

These typically break coding tasks into short, highly collaborative periods, in which everyone has well-defined roles and daily meetings are held to present and review work, and deal with arising issues. This should result in better code, as well as more accurate scheduling and budgetary control.

"Our situation isn't ideal for Scrum as you're supposed to have everyone in one office, so we're adapting it and focusing on iterations, and reviewing and presenting our code in two-week cycles, rather than being too rigorous about tasks and scheduling," Toksvig explains. "I think in time we will do more with Scrum, but we are taking it bit by bit to make sure we get everyone onboard."

There's certainly plenty for the 30-strong development to be getting on with. Building on its massive success with iPhone developers – 500 games making use of its technology have been released to date – Unity3D is also coming to Google's Android mobile platform and the forthcoming Apple iPad. Support for Xbox 360 was announced as being in development in late 2009, and PlayStation 3 is expected to follow later in 2010.

One of the key technical issues for the core team is the promise that Unity3D will run seamlessly across all of these platforms. And because it's based on Mono, the Novell-sponsored open source implementation of Microsoft's .NET framework, this means Unity's coders often have to break new ground themselves

"Mono is great because it means that you can run all .NET DLLs on any supported platform," Toksvig says.

"But when we come to devices such as iPhone or Xbox 360, which Mono doesn't support, we have to do the



Unity has over 100,000 users, ranging from Cartoon Network, Electronic Arts and even NASA

work ourselves. That's a big effort. In case of Xbox, we hired someone directly from the Mono team who worked on the .NET compilers."

Aside from such core deliberations, however, the future for Unity3D is ensuring that its browser-based web player is ready for the new standards. "We are super-interested in Google's Native Client, WebTL and HTLM5 and actively looking at how we can support them," Toksvig enthuses.

It's a brave new world out there, and however distributed its workforce, Unity is leading a charge.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **COMPANY NAME:** Rebellion

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** 1992

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 200

■ **KEY STAFF:** Jason Kingsley (CEO and creative director), Chris Kingsley (CTO), Mike Burnham (head of production)

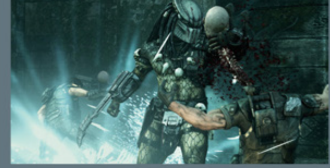


■ **URL:** www.rebellion.co.uk

■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:**
Aliens Vs Predator (360, PC, PS3), *The Simpsons Game* (PS2, PSP, Wii), *Call Of Duty Final Fronts: World At War* (PS2), *Star Wars Battlefront: Elite Squadron* (PSP)







Many of Rebellion's properties are instantly recognisable, from *Star Wars Battlefront* to *The Simpsons Game* to *COD* to *Aliens Vs Predator*

REBELLION®



■ **LOCATION:**
Oxford, UK (HQ)

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**
Unannounced 360/PC/PS3 game; unannounced 360/PS3 game; unannounced PC game for digital distribution

■ **ABOUT THE STUDIO:**

"Established in Oxford by Jason and Chris Kingsley in 1992, Rebellion has built itself into one of Europe's largest and most successful independent developers.

"With multiple studios situated at key sites around the UK and a talented team, Rebellion leads the way for larger studios to conduct triple-A projects across different sites. This, while retaining its core values of creativity, crossplatform innovation, cutting-edge technology and product quality, makes Rebellion a leading light in the global development community.

"Rebellion's first major success came with *Alien Vs Predator* on the Atari Jaguar, followed by the global hit *Aliens Vs Predator* on PC. Rebellion revisited the AVP universe to develop the recently released *Aliens Vs Predator* for PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 and PC, building on and enhancing the key strengths of the *AVP* franchise.

"With a diverse portfolio of publisher-owned and internally developed IPs, with hits such as *Sniper Elite*, *Rogue Trooper* and *Free Running*, Rebellion prides itself on its unique and innovative approach to IP development and stewardship.

"Rebellion's creativity, both technical and visual, is the crucial ingredient for its continuing success, providing a solid foundation for the development of distinctive and best-selling games."

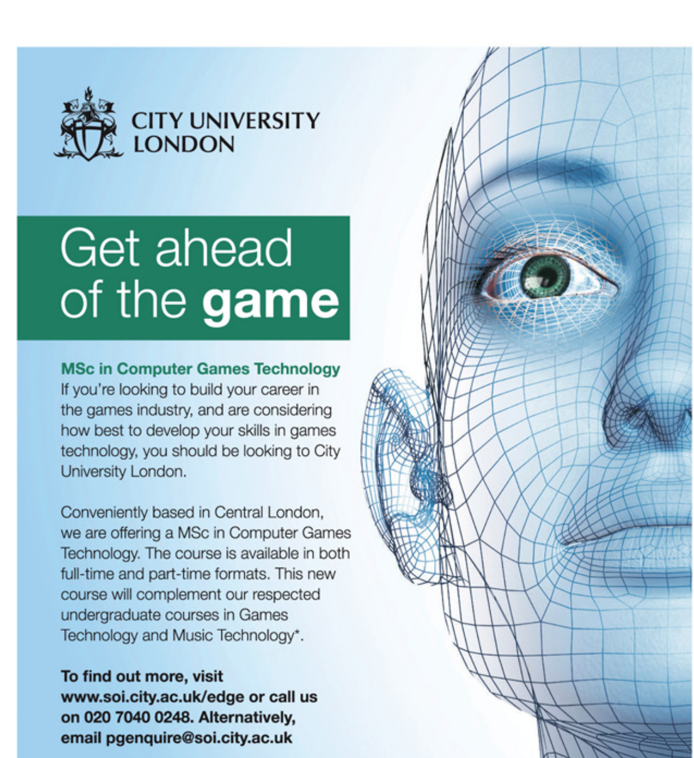


SEGA® has always been synonymous with great games and our plan is to continue to build on this great brand heritage. At the heart of SEGA Europe are our 2 world renowned development studios: Sports Interactive and The Creative Assembly.

We need talented Programmers at both SEGA and our development studios!




Join the team
www.frontier.co.uk
FRONTIER
One of the world's leading game developers. Hiring for a range of positions - see website for details.
LostWinds: Winter of the Melodias ©2008, 2009 Frontier Developments Ltd. LostWinds, Frontier and the
Frontier logo are registered trademarks of Frontier Developments Ltd. All rights reserved.


CITY UNIVERSITY
LONDON
Get ahead
of the game
MSc in Computer Games Technology
If you're looking to build your career in the games industry, and are considering how best to develop your skills in games technology, you should be looking to City University London.
Conveniently based in Central London, we are offering a MSc in Computer Games Technology. The course is available in both full-time and part-time formats. This new course will complement our respected undergraduate courses in Games Technology and Music Technology*.
To find out more, visit www.soi.city.ac.uk/edge or call us on 020 7040 0248. Alternatively, email pgenquire@soi.city.ac.uk
www.soi.city.ac.uk/edge
*City University London ranks fifth in the UK for graduate employment


EDGE


LECTURER/SENIOR LECTURER IN GAMES ART
£28,139 - £43,840 PRO RATA + PENSION • FULL OR PART TIME
It's a no-brainer. So let's cut straight to it. As the University of the Year, we're interested in both the creative and the practical halves of your brain. On the one hand you need to have a strong desire to teach the next generation of games artists, and an aptitude for motivating them to excel at all levels. On the other hand we need you to use the creative half of your brain as you advance the field of games art through groundbreaking research and enterprise activities. You can even choose to join us part-time and stay in industry in a 50-50 split. At the cutting edge of thinking, you've always done things differently and you've never been afraid to try something new. So, if you've a degree or equivalent and want to discover more about the challenge, training and creative opportunities we can offer you – call Nigel Kitching, Senior Lecturer on 01642 384606 for an informal chat or email N.C.Kitching@tees.ac.uk To apply visit http://www.tees.ac.uk/sections/jobs/jobs.cfm or contact Human Resources, Middlesbrough, Tees Valley, TS1 3BA. Tel. 01642 342200. Email: jobs@tees.ac.uk Ref: 6476. Closing date: 16 April 2010.
Teesside University
EDUCATION
INDUSTRY
No Lecturers were harmed in the making of this advert.
POSITIVE ABOUT DISABLED PEOPLE

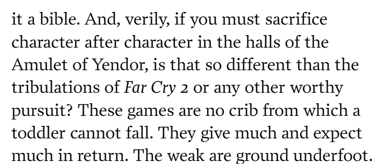
HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Blessed procedural content

BY RANDY SMITH

To thee, unbeliever: have you never had a religious experience? Perhaps you were a devotee of *Counter-Strike* or have been absorbed into the cult of *WOW*. Maybe you are a missionary for *Far Cry 2*. Can you still read *Ultima* runes and name all the Virtues and corresponding Mantras? So why baulk at the pale ASCII universe and pantheon of 26 alphabetical monsters that is *Rogue*? It's a hallowed tradition of 30 years and numerous denominations: *ADOM*, *Spelunky*, *NetHack* and, yes, even *Dwarf Fortress*.

Religions test us to prove that we are worthy, to sort believers from heretics. The ASCII graphics, we chosen would say, are an abstraction not unlike literature, a perfect vessel for our imaginations, the highest fidelity visuals available. Think not of the *Dwarf Fortress* wiki as a manual you must study for hours before you can properly begin playing the game. Consider it a bible. And, verily, if you must sacrifice character after character in the halls of the Amulet of Yendor, is that so different than the tribulations of *Far Cry 2* or any other worthy pursuit? These games are no crib from which a toddler cannot fall. They give much and expect much in return. The weak are ground underfoot.



"These games are no crib from which a toddler cannot fall. They give much and expect much in return. The weak are ground underfoot"

But it is not some thrill of exclusivity that maintains our faith. You will find in *Rogue* as in *Counter-Strike* that devotion flows from systemic depth. These games put the player first, create a stage upon which we must author our own dramas. On the surface *Rogue* might seem repetitive, and it is: infinitely the same and unique as a game of cards. Before every hand the cards are shuffled and dealt, each card a monster, ring, or some other hook into game systems, each encountered in an endless array of permutations that test and explore every corner of the possibility space. Ice monsters with paralysing frost bolts. Water traps that rust unprotected armour. Potions of blindness you can hurl as weapons.

This is the blessing of procedural content. The random dungeon layouts receive disproportionate attention, but there is much more. What makes a procedurally generated level superior to a hand-crafted one? The question contains the answer. It is precisely that the level is nothing special that makes *Rogue* more dynamic experience than static narrative. You hurl yourself into a teleportation trap to escape the wraith that attacked while you were passed out from hunger, a cliffhanger of your own creation, not a cutscene. If these moments of excitement are scarce punctuation in long paragraphs of flatness, that is to be expected from an honest simulation.

For it is Contrivance that is the Devil! Honesty, freedom: these are what procedural content brings to *ADOM*, yea, and *Spelunky*! With *God Of War* I could play along with what tale was crafted by mortal mind in Santa Monica. Or I could learn the history of my realm in *Dwarf Fortress*, which history was channelled from the divine through random generation, and decide that the last demon spoken of in myth has tormented my people for too long and launch a quest of my own to find and destroy him. *Dwarf Fortress* would sooner kill me than make it easy for me. There will be no convenient severed ship masts to use as impaling devices upon pressing 'O'. If any weapons can harm this evil, I will have to learn how they are forged or in what lost dungeon the hero fell who last wielded them. There will be no mission briefing. I will die several times before the right combination of luck and knowledge gives my quest a prayer of success. And, verily, this quest is one I cut myself from the fabric of the game. If I care nothing for demonic megabeasts, I can pursue another.

A neophyte might believe the Amulet of Yendor is the goal of *Rogue*, but the goal is the journey itself. Each demise is a lesson. To a master of the form, only the moment of death provides insight into some nuanced interplay between rules not previously comprehended. Have you watched the hint videos in *New Super Mario Bros*? Were you surprised that it's possible to butt-bonk question mark boxes to release their contents, or that Yoshis could swallow and spit back hammers? Imagine a million obscure interactions to stumble upon and make use of, a universe of rules to master. Scream your deity's name to sacrifice monsters upon the altars of *ADOM*, but never kick those altars. Dunk wands in the right potions to recharge them. Always fight slimes in doorways so you won't get surrounded if they multiply. If you eat a troll corpse and feel blood course through your veins, you've gained regeneration abilities. An *ADOM* character is measured by the wisdom of his player, not a number that follows 'XP'. But! Is this plaid potion one of healing or sleeping? Here again randomness shines, shifting names and identities, leaving you knowing everything and yet nothing.

My prayers may bring no new converts to *Rogue*. Perhaps at least they can explain the devotion of the followers, or the splendour of procedural content.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch




12
www.pegi.info
PlayStation Network
START DOWNLOADING
HUNDREDS OF MOVIES
WITH THE
PLAYSTATION®NETWORK
VIDEO STORE
THE GAME IS JUST THE START
Why go out for a great movie when you can download it? The PlayStation®Network Video Store gives you the latest, greatest movies from Hollywood and beyond, straight to your living room, at the click of a button. Start getting the movie you want, when you want with PlayStation®3.
DATE: RIGHT NOW SHOWING AT: YOUR HOUSE ADMIT ONE
5
0
R3
The Hangover. Inglourious Basterds. Star Trek. Public Enemies. Terminator Salvation. Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince™. Now available on the PlayStation®Network Video Store.
PS3™
PlayStation 3
PlayStation® Store
SONY
make.believe



BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Context sensitive

I am on a train, watching someone play *Patience* on his iPhone. He thumbs each card on to the appropriate pile, the touchscreen interface evidently furnishing a satisfying tactility. But then, when he completes the round, the machine takes over, whisking all the cards back into a fresh deck in a trice. It strikes me that the machine has stolen a potential moment of Zen contemplation. In the physical game, the action of picking up all your cards from the table, shuffling them and squaring the deck is something more than a mere chore: it is an integral ingredient of the corporeal meditation that constitutes playing *Patience*.

If you asked the iPhone player whether he'd like to gather up the cards himself after every game, he might think it a silly idea. That the machine does it automatically is, he might say, a labour-saving intervention. This, too, is a reasonable view. Imagine, after clearing a stage of *Breakout*, having to replace all the bricks in the ceiling one by one. (A game such as *Tetris*, meanwhile, is entirely predicated on the machine's ability to whisk away what you have lined up for it.)

Videogames in general differ markedly as to how far the continuous simulation extends, versus what the system will grant by magic. Take a game whose basic structure involves travelling to different areas and killing things in them. In the spirit of 'don't bore us, get to the chorus', some games will instantly transport you from one arena to another, perhaps via a cutscene (*Uncharted 2*); while others force you to actually perform the time-consuming travel: thus, in *Far Cry 2*, the journey can be just as interesting and satisfying as the arrival, the approach no less important than the attack. I rapidly became bored, however, with the map-jockeying demanded by *Spirit Tracks*. The fact that your exploration is literally on rails, and that the demon trains are such annoyingly gratuitous dynamic obstacles, meant that the game as a whole lost its charm for me in a way that *Phantom Hourglass* never did.

One of the greatest experiments to date in the continuous simulation has been *Shenmue*, whose rapt recreation of life's humdrum interstices made an unprecedentedly rich ground for the moments of action and intrigue – just as outbreaks of violence or the supernatural in the novels of Stephen King are all the more effective for the setting of almost pedantic naturalism.

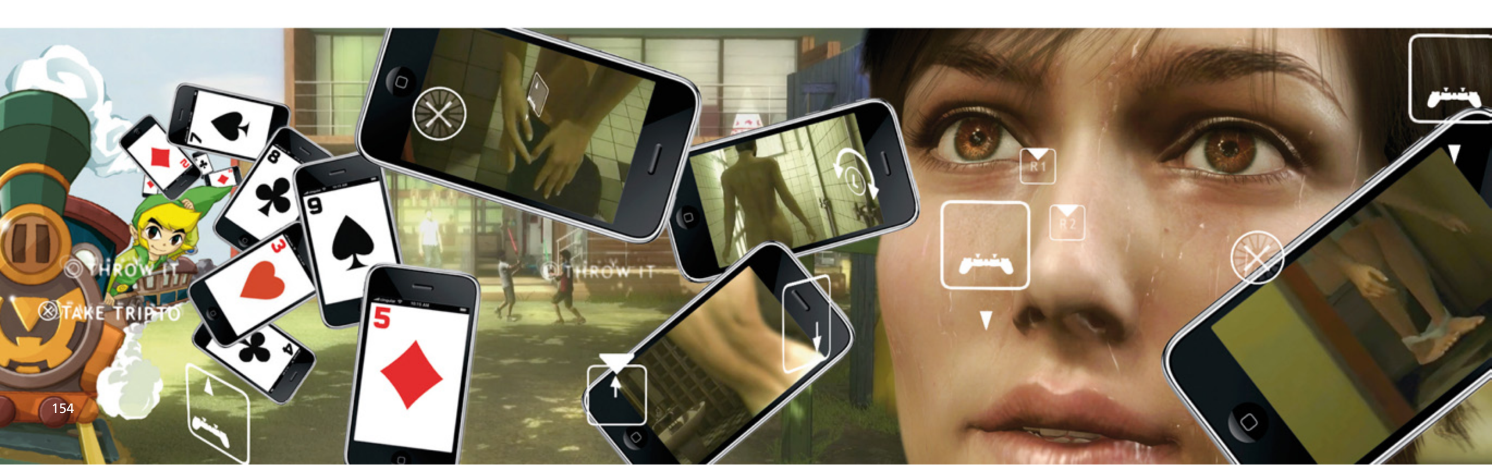
> "In its own way, a game sequence that invites the player to help a woman dry her knees with a towel is a groundbreaking moment"

The videogame designer's decision as to what happens instantaneously by system fiat, rather than being recreated as interactive process, is arguably analogous to the manifold decisions made in film-editing on both the micro scale (the aesthetic import of lingering on one static shot for a further eight frames) and the macro scale (what length of time can be telescoped into a cut for storytelling purposes). Cinema has enjoyed a century of experimentation with theories and styles of montage, but games are still venturing out nervously from their hub to explore the vast terra incognita of what such decisions can be taken to mean artistically.

And this is one reason why we should be glad that a designer such as David Cage is forging into unexplored territory on exactly this matter. As I write, *Chubby Drizzle* has not yet been released, but footage of the shower scene is attracting the hypnotised nerd-gaze of thousands on the internet. Whatever one thinks of this oddly '80s-soft-porn interlude (with its coy out-of-focus foreground sink helpfully protecting the player from any traumatic sight of digitally modelled pubic hair), and the implicit argument that the virtual-breast shot counts as an advance in videogame 'maturity', it is in itself an interesting cultural milestone that a link to game footage can now come with a sincerely meant 'NSFW' label. (It is strange, when you think about it, that graphic representations of relentless mass killing are understood to be perfectly safe for work, while a simulated image of a naked woman isn't, but such are the gynophobic and bellicose priorities of our entire culture.) And, in its own peculiar way, a game sequence that invites the player to help an undressed virtual woman dry her knees with a towel is a groundbreaking moment, in exactly the way that the subsequent QTE-driven action scene, a bizarrely loving recreation of that 'erotic thriller' staple, woman-in-underwear-fights-grunting-intruders, isn't.

Anything that extends the possible vocabulary of videogame 'interaction' past shoot, move, jump or interact-with-door, and also extends the remit of the continuous simulation into as-yet-unexplored realms, is surely to be welcomed on that account, whatever the shortcomings of its context. And so this towelling-down, this one throwaway moment, is something like a tiny-voiced promise of better things to come. You might not want, after all, to tidy up the cards after a virtual game of patience, but shouldn't the game let you choose?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net




BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

No rushing

I am not an anti-cutscene advocate, though I know several people who are. There are some things – certain types of exposition, bits of information, epic sequences of destruction or complicated scenes of emotion – that are delivered more efficiently, more spectacularly, more cost effectively, more touchingly, through cutscenes. I am a fan of the *Half-Life*-style opening sequence, where the player's steady, semi-interactive movement through a series of spaces slowly seduces him or her into the game's fictional reality. Yet I'm not convinced of the inherent superiority of Valve staging mini-plays for the benefit of the person puppeteering the world's most famous mute over kicking back and watching one of Hideo Kojima's History Channel-fuelled debates between two weary soldiers before or after a boss fight. There's more than one way to skin a cat, as the saying goes, and the medium is still too young to be overly doctrinal on this subject.

> What I wanted was the opportunity to form an emotional bond with my Little Sister; to guide her and follow her through Rapture

Having said all that, I was nevertheless surprised to find myself surprised by the way that 2K Marin chose to open *BioShock 2*. From a narrative perspective, the setup is masterful: a mostly unbroken POV shot of a Big Daddy walking over to an access tunnel and banging on it until his Little Sister emerges; walking behind her as she extracts ADAM from the corpse of a Splicer and consumes it; following her into a room where a party is taking place, then chasing after the sound of her screams; confronting a group of Splicers who are menacing her and killing two of them, only to have the last one hit him with a Hypnotize Big Daddy Plasmid; and finally, obeying the orders of Dr Sophia Lamb as she orders him to take off his helmet, take a pistol, put it to his head and pull the trigger. All as his Little Sister – Lamb's biological daughter – looks on.

The sequence is moving, enabling a viewer to identify with the events not only from the Big Daddy's perspective, but also from Lamb's. It's also efficient; from beginning to end, the entire scene lasts about three minutes. And it cleverly encapsulates some of the key themes from the first game. But the reason I was surprised is that even though the level of detail of the assets and the nature of the events depicted suggested that the opening could have been presented interactively, the only interactive option was to press a button to skip the cutscene entirely. For a franchise that was built around, among other things, the concepts of choice and free will, I couldn't believe that the 2K Marin team had chosen to open their sequel by taking that choice away.

There are any number of perfectly valid reasons why they made this decision, not the least of which would be that this actual opening could have been settled on late in the process. But it points up one of the necessary tensions between cutscenes and gameplay: unless the studio is Kojima Productions, the moment developers a cutscene begins, the developer almost certainly feels as though the clock is ticking towards the inevitable boredom of the player. And what do you do when you feel the clock ticking? You rush. Had this been an interactive sequence – say, the first half of the tutorial – 2K Marin's designers might have felt at liberty to give the opening more than the three minutes they gave it.

In my opinion, that sequence merits the extra time. With a mere three minutes, all the writers and director of this sequence can do is deliver a premise, exposition, context, and the broad strokes of emotion. But as the scene drew to a close, I already knew that wasn't what I wanted from it. What I wanted was the opportunity to form an emotional bond with my Little Sister; to guide her and follow her through a couple of parts of Rapture; to attempt to defend her from the Splicers who would do her harm; and to struggle helplessly as her mother forced me to kill myself. I didn't want to watch it. I wanted to take control of the Big Daddy until Dr Lamb wrested control of me from me. I wanted more time than the three minutes that 2K Marin was willing to grant me, because I believe that in that period of time – even if it was just the two of us walking hand in hand, *Ico*-style, as the Little Sister called out various sights and sounds of Rapture – I could have forged a tighter connection with her before the game proper began.

Actually, that concept of 'the game proper' might be equally to blame. One thing I've found during my first year as a consultant is that many developers don't really believe that their game begins where it begins. It's often some point two minutes, five minutes, ten minutes into the experience. But rather than start at that point, they start somewhere else and dash madly towards the starting line. And I'm thinking to myself: I've already paid my $60, so there's no need to rush. Take your time. Trust in your environments, your characters, your mechanics. And if you don't trust that, trust me – I will find the appropriate pace with which to begin my adventure in your world.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



Inbox


Issue 212



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: Would you buy an 18 cert game for a child?

I don't buy them booze, I won't buy them fags, I definitely won't buy them magazines or games. They can abide by the same laws I abided by. If you're not old enough to buy it, you can't buy it.
Eregol

It depends on the game. *Killer 7* is an 18 cert and I'd have no problems buying that for someone who's 16.
SpaceGazelle

I'd consider buying an 18 certificate game for one of my kids, though it would really just be an elaborate excuse to buy the game for myself...
tin robot

I am amazed how many of you are apparently willing to follow the orders of children.
Unlikely

They carry knives, you know.
SpaceGazelle

I enjoyed **E**212's review of *Heavy Rain*, Quantic Dream's latest frustrating but beguiling attempt to make Citizen Kane: Gamer's Edition. I knew that the game would feature some of what is arguably the finest digital acting yet seen. I also guessed that the narrative would be about as adult and interesting as is currently possible for a major studio to produce, with playful nods to parallel events across the four story arcs and sympathetic but flawed characters. This much I knew before I put the disc in my PS3. What I wasn't expecting was for *Heavy Rain* to boil the concept of 'play' down to an insulting level. Playing the game, I feel more like a movie projectionist, repeatedly starting and stopping short films, than an empowered player significantly affecting the life of my avatar. I want to agree with David Cage when he says his game is 'interactive drama', but I feel there is nothing truly interactive about it, not in terms of how you play it and not in its linear narrative.

Nowhere is the dumbing down of play more evident than in the dynamic control system, where the same control has literally hundreds of different outcomes in the game, many of which are only used once. In what way is shaking a carton of orange juice the same as trying to avoid being stabbed? You have to waggle the controller up and down for both. How can I feel like I'm in control of the character if I don't know what they are going to do next, only how they are going to do it?

Game makers, fans and academics have been wondering for the last two or three decades about whether it is truly feasible to create a convincingly organic narrative that evolves with play, but I ask: would that even be a videogame? Could it still be a piece of software in the same genre as *Peggle*? Do we really need 'Hamlet on the Holodeck' when we can send Solid Snake sneaking or Mario squirting across a galaxy? Games like *Mass Effect* or *BioShock* are mature enough to know that narrative only really helps us suspend our disbelief and that long-term fun is to be had exploring, shooting, driving and, in numerous other ways, interacting. The dynamic that exists between the player, the controller and the screen is a more dramatic concept than it is regularly given credit for being.

The dynamic that exists between the player, the controller and the screen is a more dramatic concept than it is regularly given credit for being

Heavy Rain has succeeded in being closer to an animated movie than a game: I wonder if that really is success.
Iain McKinstry

One dilemma presented by *Heavy Rain* is that simply by being a videogame it encourages you to judge it by established genre conventions, and yet at the same time it asks you to consider it alongside wholly non-interactive media such as film. Of more concern, though, was some of the commentary that surrounded the game's release, suggesting that Quantic Dream's chosen technique represents the one distinct way forward for the development of storytelling in games. Much as we like many things about *Heavy Rain*, such talk is shortsighted nonsense.



Letter of the month wins a DSi

I was interested to read your reviews introduction in **E**212 regarding the backlash against *Dante's Inferno* and championing the game's right to exist. I agree completely with that sentiment, but think the criticism the game received in some ways reflects a valid frustration with the treatment of fiction, both new and interpreted, in videogames as a whole.

In recent years, the more games I play, the more I become interested in the potential of the medium and find fewer actually existing examples that appeal. One notable recent exception has been the superb *Bayonetta*, particularly its sense of spectacle and comprehensive combat mechanics, which I've enjoyed more than anything else in some while. But this eventually served to add urgency to a nagging voice in the back of my mind, asking: 'So, where do we go from here?'

If my enthusiasm was flagging before and needed something of this quality to revive it, the prospect of playing a combat-based action adventure post *Bayonetta* is completely uninspiring – effectively the zenith of the genre, in terms of game mechanics, has been reached. This recalls the dead-end racing games have found themselves in over the last few years – small visual improvements,



greater online functionality and more customisation (all themselves now standard) hiding the fact there's nowhere new to go.

However, in the world of action adventure there is always somewhere else to go in terms of characters, narrative and environment. Despite the limits of the game style, the prospect of a completely different take on familiar actions via a genuinely absorbing fiction is still exciting. While the fiction in *Bayonetta* fits and doesn't take itself at all seriously, it's pretty tiresome stuff in many respects and here there's room for something new. Perhaps, then, the backlash against *Dante's Inferno* is fiction. But, bar a few notable examples such as *Braid* and *No More Heroes* (cleverly subverting its own adolescent silliness through a nuanced 'metagame' narrative), this hasn't really taken hold. I still appreciate the finer points of gameplay in, say, *Bayonetta* or *Halo*, but there's a gap in terms of maturity of fiction that becomes more obvious and in need of filling the more game mechanics approach 'perfection'.

Of course, many players are still eagerly anticipating the next *Halo* despite (because?) it being pretty much the same as all the others, but there's something increasingly empty about the prospect from where I'm sitting.
Jon Bailes

With more genres reaching logical endpoints, I would hope to see more consideration placed on the development of innovative gaming fiction

also a sign of such boredom amongst certain gamers, albeit erroneously vented against one particular game because it utilised a fiction that suggested more potential. Personally, despite being unsure how Dante's Inferno would translate into a videogame, I was initially intrigued by the idea, only to be disappointed when it turned out the source material was little more than background to a hard-worn formula.

With more genres reaching logical endpoints and audiovisual technology becoming more uniform, I would hope to see more consideration placed on development of innovative gaming



Quantic Dream's *Heavy Rain*: closer to being an animated movie than a game, according to Iain McKinstry

I pluck owls. It's my day job – I work for a team of ecologists, and among their current projects is a review of British predatory birds. Owls come in (bagged, tagged and frozen), I pluck 'em, and then they're burnt down to ash for radiochemical analysis.

Digest that for a moment (I wouldn't suggest trying to digest an owl – not much meat there at all), and then try and remember the last time you played a videogame that was weirder than my day job.

What comes to mind? *Noby Noby Boy* and its amorphous Plasticine caterpillar? Something from the *Silent Hill* library, complete with slimy monsters and Freudian subplot? *Grim Fandango*'s cheery film-noir day of the dead, or covering up a murder you would later investigate in *Fahrenheit*? *Killer 7*? *Ico*? *Eternal Darkness*?

You can probably conjure up one or two examples (mine is *Killer 7* – "We're in a tight spot!") but in a medium that prides itself on its novelty and regularly sends players to alien worlds and fantastic landscapes, that's pretty poor.

Dozens of games let me slaughter alien monsters, but what about performing open-heart surgery on deep-sea mammals? *The Sims* gives me a virtual dollhouse of unlimited size and complexity, but if I want to govern the fascist kingdom of the Arch-Fiend of Bunny Rabbits, I'm stuck. Shooting people in the face is well catered for, but tending to the mental well-being of shell-shock victims from the First Time War is completely underrepresented. Shouldn't there be more games that feel completely alien, abnormal, and weird?

I'm not making any serious game suggestions here – just pointing out that the realms of creativity are limitless, while most games sit in the middle of a well-cultivated and often-visited garden. Wild, uncontrolled (and sometimes borderline-insane) bursts of creativity have produced some of gaming's finest masterpieces, but the medium is closeted by conservatism.

When I get home after a tough day plucking owls, I like to unwind with a game. I'm not dissatisfied with what's on offer. But it would be fantastic to load something up and think, 'Holy Hell. That's weird'.
Tim Franklin



Tim Franklin wants to know: where's the weirdness in games today? Will we ever again see big releases as experimental and distinctive as Grasshopper/Capcom's *Killer 7*?

'Closeted by conservatism' is a good way of summing things up, at least in terms of what's coming out of most

Continued



Topic: Quit your jibba jabba!

Ever wish that NPC would just shut up and let you get on with the pillaging? Last night I was watching my collector's edition DVD for *Dragon Age* where the developers show you different builds for characters and how to get special armour for them. It all sounded so exciting so I decided to try out the Battle-Mage build.

Lo and behold, it was hours (literally) before I could actually go out and kill something. It got me thinking, are developers becoming too obsessed with the cinematic experience that core gameplay suffers as a consequence?
Speedhaak

It can be incredibly annoying when long speech samples are triggered at random during gameplay as this can often lead to the same irritating and unfunny passages being spoken over and over again, sometimes with several all playing at once over the top of each other.
moonkeh

I don't like Dudley's new voice.
Cherry Pez

I think that sometimes games put too much emphasis on conversations at the start of the game, when all you want to do is start playing, but in general it is fine.

I agree with Speedhaak in that when getting to a new town it can sometimes be overwhelming with all the new people to talk to, most of which is nothing to do with your quests or just anything in particular. Having markers to determine which of those are going to give you a quest and which won't is always good, as if you just want to get in, get the quests and go you can.

Perhaps the problem is that nowadays you have to listen to audio, rather than just read text? Long conversations have been around for a long time, but being able to just skim read some lines rather than having to listen to everything will shorten the time spent conversing. You can get the gist of what is being said, but can determine if it matters or not.
MattyJ



mainstream studios. What about the indie scene, though? With continually rising production values, the games coming out of bedrooms and basements the world over have never been more deserving of attention. In between sampling them (and plucking), make some time for your new DSi.

After reading both Brick Bardo's article in **E**211 and the rather critical response letter by Phil Asquith that followed in **E**212, I felt compelled to write in too, as I find it to be a very interesting topic for games.

I agree entirely with Brick Bardo; with the right developer and publisher, we could see a variety of forms in which our well-loved game characters are expressed within vastly different genres and game worlds. Consider *Smash Bros Brawl*: even though the concept may have been inspired by the appeal of pitting game characters from other worlds into one fight, you cannot argue against the sheer joy of seeing Solid Snake throw a Poké Ball at Sonic while wearing a rabbit headband.

But this has got me thinking further. What if we had an agency company within the game industry that created or owned an archive of game characters, which it nurtured to fame through roles in games commissioned by developers and/or publishers? Before you call me crazy, please think of the advantages here. It would have the potential of creating a digital network community of approachable game characters or actors that are at the disposal of their paying developers and publishers or clients, who in turn could put the ready-made fame of this game character to good use by creating a new and interesting role for he, she or it to play.

With the prior knowledge of an already famous game character, it would help to combat the daunting effects that players often suffer when playing a brand-new game concept for the first time. Would the new Alice In Wonderland and Charlie And The Chocolate Factory films earn as much recognition and hype before release without a certain Jack Sparrow quality?

Perhaps this system wouldn't become fully established overnight due to rights and ownerships over existing game characters today, but rather be a gradual process as new characters build on their fame through roles in various games over multiple platforms. Until then, in Brick Bardo's words: "...we'll just have to wait – but afterwards we can tell everyone we saw it coming".
Adam Stevens



Adam Stevens imagines a world in which game characters transcend traditional boundaries, taking the *Smash Bros* concept to a new level

We still like the idea, but our facial muscles can't help twitching a little when you talk about entrusting the creation of characters to agencies.



Topic: The lost art of making a difficult game

I recently borrowed the *Sega Mega Drive Collection* and yes, games used to be more difficult. Not everything about being difficult was positive – bottomless pits unwittingly sprung upon you, leaps of faith, little to no signposting etc. However, I do think there are certain elements that made older games hard (and arguably more enjoyable) that have gone AWOL. Playing *Streets Of Rage* and *Golden Axe* makes me wonder why lives and continues have been abolished. There's something quite enjoyable about knowing you're going to spend two to three hours with a game which you may, or may not, see to the end. There was a sense of achievement when you played a game from start to finish in one session. Now this seems to be somewhat of a lost art.

I genuinely think that games are too generous with their checkpoints and the ability to save your progress at any time. Take *Modern Warfare 2*'s story mode, for example – I received checkpoints literally every minute. This influenced the way I played it. Instead of taking my time, carefully approaching each set-piece with the mindset I could get my face shot off in one hit, I just charged in knowing that upon death I would simply be taken back 30 seconds. If checkpoints were more sparse I'd approach such set-pieces with more caution.

Being able to save your game at any time removes any sense of challenge from proceedings. Think a hard bit is coming up? Simply save it then charge in and see what happens. My question is, do you miss the short and sweet sessions of old? And do you think games are too generous with their 'safety nets'?
Dogfingers

I think maybe you're looking at those games with rose-tinted specs, old chum. I seem to remember pulling my hair out and smashing controllers with a lot of games that had the lives and continues mechanic. Not so much 'short and sweet' as 'unfair and infuriating'.
benjibumps78

I would like to provide a counter argument to Tristan May's letter (**E**211) in defence of **Edge**'s scoring system. As a magazine that provides a critique on new releases, like any such publication that offers a viewpoint (such as newspapers), the opinions and scores given are based on its readership. In other words, you should expect, say, a multiformat magazine like **Edge** to give a different opinion (or score) for a given game in comparison to one that is a single-format magazine.

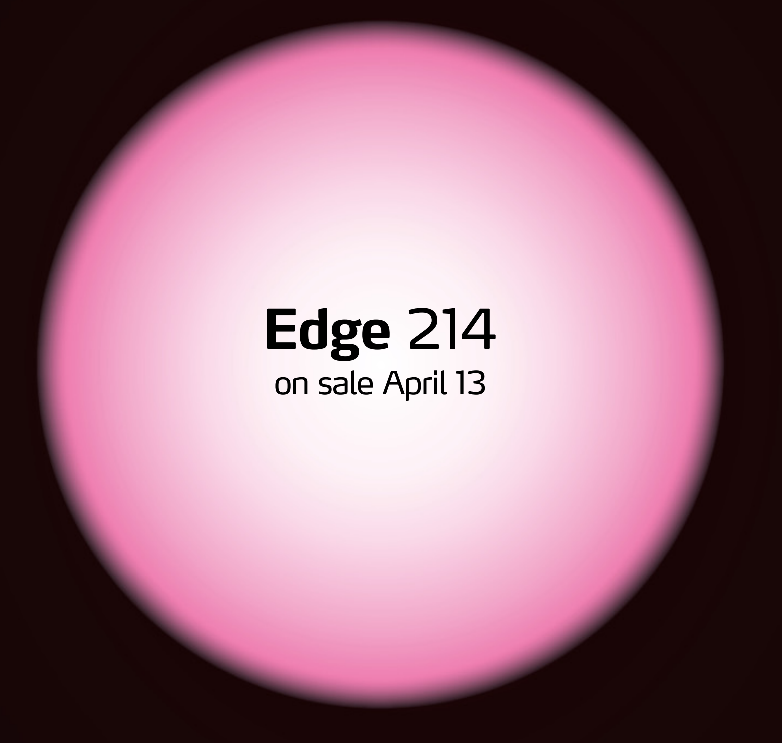
Of course, this may not (and should not) always be the case, and readers of single-format magazines may very well (and probably do) own other machines, but the staff at a single-format magazine only have to consider that their magazine is the readers' primary source of information, and will base his/her decision on games that exist on said platform. **Edge**, as a multiformat magazine, may give a different view of the same game because there's no immediate bias to a given system, and will openly compare it to a similar/better example, be it on the same system or not.

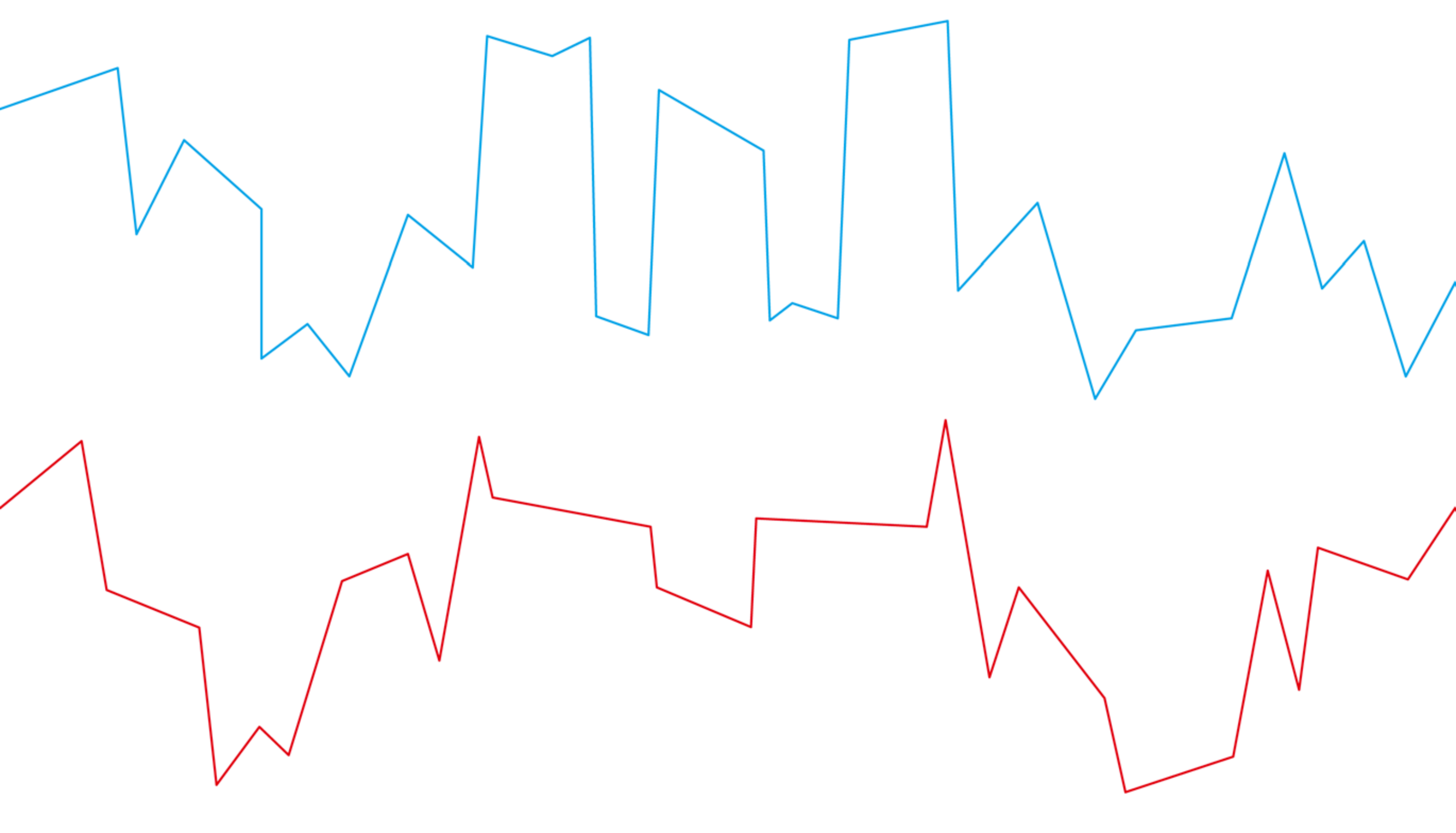
Comparisons of different scores from critics/gamers can be useful, but only when used appropriately. For example, if you took the year-on-year performance of a major supermarket, and compared it to, say, a local business, how useful would that be? That's why groups of companies, supermarkets, banks, football clubs, clothing and so on are compared with each other. A more useful comparison, perhaps, would be all multiformat, single-format and individual critics separated into groups, to give a more balanced playing field. A score from **Edge** is just that – an opinion which you may or may not agree with, and the review is the justification of the score.

And the irony of it all: the one magazine that has in the past experimented with doing away with scores altogether is time and again accused of unfair bias for/against a given system – an endless debate which certainly bores the hell out of me. The integrity of **Edge** has always remained intact, and it's a much better read than anything else out there.
dODDs

OK, we'll call those the final words on these pages concerning review scores. (At least until the next utter outrage.)

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.com)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address:
Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing,
30 Monmouth Street,
Bath BA1 2BW


Edge 214
on sale April 13



EDGE
edge-online.com



